

What Price Victory?
When Leaders Underestimate the Cost of War

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In the months leading up to the U.S. intervention to evict Iraq from Kuwait, many military experts and scholars feared a difficult and costly campaign (Biddle 2004; Record 1993). Military historians predicted the “most lethal war since 1945” (Towle 1991), “a conflict as prolonged as that of Korea and possibly as unwinnable as Vietnam” (Howard 1990). Retired General William Odom, head of National Security Agency during the Reagan administration, warned of “large, costly, and bloody campaign” (U.S. Senate 1990, 12). A British journalist reported that the United States and Britain were preparing thousands of hospital beds for the casualties they expected and news reports about body bag orders made the U.S. public skittish (*The Independent*, Stiles 2004). Keaney and Cohen (1995) describe the “long parade of military experts and historians” that “trudged to Capitol Hill to warn senators and members of Congress that bombing merely stiffened an opponent’s morale.”

In reality, Operation Desert Storm was a quick and decisive victory for the United States and the allies suffered far fewer casualties than anyone had predicted. Instead of filling thousands of hospital beds in a protracted conflict, the United States liberated Kuwait after a six week air campaign and a 100 hour ground war, losing only 146 soldiers in combat (Clodfelter 2002). After the war, political and military leaders in the U.S. hailed the conflict as a model for the future of warfare. Both President Bush and Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed that the war in the Gulf had exorcised the ghosts of the Vietnam war (Bacevich 2003; Powell 1995). And the Joint Chiefs subsequently began developing military doctrine that would allow the U.S. to attain ‘full spectrum dominance’ – “the capability to prevail, quickly and cheaply, in any and all forms of conflict” (Powell 1995, 157). Perhaps not coincidentally, the United States engaged in unprecedented levels of military activism in the decade that followed the war.

The current administration’s experience in Iraq stands in sharp contrast. In OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, U.S. troops overthrew Saddam Hussein’s regime quickly and few American lives were lost in combat. On May 1, 2003 the Bush administration declared victory and an end to major combat operations. However, after the fall of the regime, the United States’ primary political objective shifted from regime removal to nation-building and the target became a growing insurgent movement. Original

war plans had called for a rapid troop draw-down shortly after the overthrow of the regime. Instead, more troops were deployed, the Pentagon announced plans to extend tours of duty, and each branch of the military issued “stop-loss” orders prohibiting some soldiers and officers from leaving military service at retirement or the expiration of their contracts. At the same time, casualties began to mount. While only 109 U.S. soldiers lost their lives in combat before the U.S. declared victory, the Department of Defense reports that 2,247 soldiers died in the war between March 19, 2003 and February 4, 2006.

All evidence suggests that chief advisors and key decision-makers in the Bush administration grossly underestimated the cost of establishing and maintaining a politically viable, US-friendly regime in Iraq (Daalder and Lindsay 2003; Johnson 2004; Record and Terrill 2004). In an interview, Frederick Kagan, a professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, observes that war-planners “focused very much on the one thing that we knew we could do, which was destroy the Iraqi military, and didn’t think very much about the one thing that was actually going to be very hard to do, which is transition to democracy” (Johnson 2004, 200). When General Shinseki, the army chief of staff, testified before a Senate committee that several hundred thousand troops would be required for post-war stability operations, Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz dismissed his estimate as much too high (Senate Armed Services Committee 2003). Overwhelming firepower and light, mobile troops were exceptionally effective in the regime-change phase of operations, but there is now widespread agreement that the number of troops was insufficient and that the military was inadequately prepared to manage the transition to peacekeeping and nation-building that followed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

While military defeat has never been a real possibility for U.S. forces, it looks increasingly possible that the United States could unilaterally withdraw its military force before real stability is achieved in Iraq. In a CBS News/New York Times poll published April 28, 2004, 44% of Americans said that the fighting in Iraq was more difficult than they had personally expected, and 67% believed the war was harder than the Bush Administration expected. By March 2006, 57% of respondents in an ABC News/Washington Post survey thought that the war in Iraq was not worth the cost and 46% felt strongly

that the war was not worth fighting.¹ A poll conducted by the Gallup Organization February 28-March 1, 2006, found that 64% of Americans disapproved of the way that President Bush was handling the situation in Iraq and 55% thought sending U.S. troops to Iraq had been a mistake.²

War is a high stakes gamble for national leaders. At times, states that use military force abroad are able to achieve their objectives at a human and material cost they consider acceptable. Frequently, however, they fail to obtain their war aims and they bear higher than expected social, economic, and political costs in the war effort (Arreguin-Toft 2001; Blechman and Kaplan 1978; Regan 2000; Sullivan 2004). Much of the recent literature on war initiation in political science has centered on what have become known as “rationalist” explanations for war. According to this approach, incomplete information about an adversary’s military capabilities and resolve makes it difficult for leaders to arrive at accurate predictions about the likely cost and outcome of military operations. In this atmosphere of uncertainty, decision-makers lead countries into ill-fated wars because they underestimate the cost and/or overestimate the likelihood of victory. As scholar Geoffrey Blainey (1973) famously states, “war is a failure of measurement.”

Under what conditions are a state’s leaders most likely to underestimate the human and material costs of war? Under what conditions are they more likely to form either accurate or inflated pre-war expectations about the cost of achieving their war aims? The answers are critical to our understanding of both war initiation and war outcomes, but extant scholarship in international relations provides neither the theory nor the data to answer them. Existing theories recognize that misperception and miscalculation are common causes of war. But these theories are incomplete if they cannot predict *when* state leaders are most likely to underestimate the cost of war.

¹ Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, March 2-March 5, 2006. Retrieved March 10, 2006 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. <<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html>>.

² Survey by Cable News Network, USA Today and Gallup Organization, February 28-March 1, 2006. Retrieved March 10, 2006 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. <<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html>>.

I extend the implications of a rationalist model of war initiation (Fearon 1995; Powell 2002), to explore the implications of pre-war uncertainty for war duration and outcome. In the model I present, actors select themselves into armed conflicts only when their pre-war estimates of the cost of attaining their political objectives through the use of force fall below the threshold of their tolerance for costs. The more the actual costs of victory exceed a state's pre-war expectations, the greater the risk that it will be pushed beyond its cost-tolerance threshold and forced to unilaterally withdraw its forces before it attains its war aims.

Rationalist theories of war outcomes have generally assumed that leaders are uncertain about the balance of military capabilities between them and their adversary, but my focus in this project is on the accuracy of leaders' pre-war expectations in conflicts with much weaker opponents. I argue that, in asymmetric wars, the nature of the strong state's primary political objective determines whether *relative destructive capacity* or *relative cost-tolerance* has a greater impact on the cost of victory. Because leaders are more likely to have accurate estimates of relative destructive capacity than of relative cost-tolerance, we can expect estimates of the cost of victory to become less accurate as relative resolve becomes a more influential factor. I develop a typology of political objectives that places the political objectives states pursue through the use of military on a continuum from *unilateral* to *dependent* based on the degree of *target compliance* required to attain the objective. As states become more dependent on target compliance to achieve their war aims, the *target's cost-tolerance* becomes a greater determinant of the cost of victory and *uncertainty* increases.

Although I cannot measure uncertainty directly, I expect wars to be *longer*, and war initiators to be *less likely to prevail*, when pre-war uncertainty is greatest (Slantchev 2004). The results of a quantitative analysis in which I use a multinomial logit model to predict the duration and outcome of all major power military interventions provide evidence that strong states are more likely to select themselves into wars they cannot sustain to victory when they pursue political objectives that are dependent on target compliance. I then take a closer look at the military operations conducted by the

United States and find that U.S. decisionmakers have repeatedly underestimated the cost of attaining war aims that are dependent on target compliance.

Expectations and War

Dominic Johnson (2004) argues that there is a human tendency to overconfidence that is likely to be a particularly common trait among political leaders and an especially acute problem in crisis decision-making. According to him, a “fog of hope and wishful thinking” is often present at the initiation of violent conflicts. The idea is not new. Blainey (1973) asserts that war is “the outcome of a diplomatic crisis which cannot be solved because both sides have conflicting estimates of their bargaining power” (114). Because war results from a disagreement about relative military capabilities, he argues that hierarchical systems, in which differences in power are clear, are the least war-prone. Similarly, Jervis (1988) claims that “Excessive military optimism is frequently associated with the outbreak of war” (676) and Van Evera (1999) implicates “false optimism about relative power” as the proximate cause of most wars (16).

In his enormously influential article on rationalist explanations for war, Fearon (1995) demonstrates that, because war is costly and risky, there should always be a range of bargains which both states would prefer to war. However, because leaders do not have complete information about their opponents’ power and resolve and have difficulty communicating this information because they have incentives to misrepresent their own capabilities and willingness to fight, both states could *believe* that they would obtain a better outcome by going to war than by accepting any negotiated settlement their opponent is willing to offer. The key is that, because one or both sides lack complete information, fully rational leaders could come to different conclusions about the probable outcome of a war between them.

Filson and Werner (2002), Slantchev (2003), Powell (2004), and Wagner (2000) expand on Fearon’s model, relaxing the assumption that both sides must believe they will win a *military* victory in order for war to be rational. Even a state that has no expectation that it could prevail in a military contest with a stronger adversary, could benefit from fighting if it could raise that adversary’s estimate of the weak state’s power. By convincing its opponent that it is stronger than the opponent originally thought,

the weak state could then settle on terms that would be better than any available pre-war bargain.

According to Slantchev, the “Principle of Convergence states that once expectations [about what each side is prepared to concede] converge sufficiently, war loses its informational content, and hostilities can terminate with a negotiated settlement” (621).

All of the authors recognize that states can be uncertain about more than just the distribution of military capabilities between them, but none of them attempt to model the other major source of uncertainty, uncertainty about an opponent’s *resolve*. Although models are necessarily simplifications of reality, ignoring the role of resolve in determining the conduct and outcome of a war is misleading. In essence, rationalist explanations for war assume that states could avoid war by negotiating a pre-war bargain based on the distribution of power between them, if only states could come to a consensus about what that distribution was. Unfortunately for all of us, predicting war outcomes is much more complicated than arriving at an accurate measure of relative military capabilities.³ In fact, the relative balance of *military capabilities* is not likely to be the primary source of pre-war uncertainty and even complete information about the distribution of war-fighting capacity is unlikely to translate directly into accurate predictions about the cost and outcome of many wars.

Oftentimes, scholars have information about the relative distribution of military capabilities between two states that is at least as good, if not better, than political leaders had at the time they were making their decisions. But the empirical evidence of a direct relationship between relative material capabilities and war outcomes has been mixed. Cannizzo (1980) reports that the state with the largest military won all but nine of the thirty wars between two states from 1816-1965. But Maoz (1983) finds that his measure of the balance of military capabilities between two states is unrelated to dispute outcomes. In Maoz (1989), he argues that the relationship between “control over resources and control over conflict outcomes is either weak or nonexistent” (247). The results of empirical tests reported by Bueno de Mesquita (1981) and Stam (1996) indicate that military power is an important predictor of

³ Perhaps by “power”, scholars mean more than relative capabilities, but something more like “influence”. But it is tautological to say that leaders could accurately predict war outcomes if they had complete information about relative power in this broader sense.

success in war. However, Bueno de Mesquita (2000) notes that the less powerful state prevailed in 41% of the wars in the last 200 years and Sullivan (2004) finds that major powers failed to achieve their war aims in 39% of the military interventions they conducted against weak state and non-state targets since 1945.

Why would we expect political leaders to be capable of producing accurate *ex ante* predictions about the outcome of wars when social scientists are not able to do so with better information and none of the constraints of a crisis situation? Perhaps our measures of military power are just not refined enough; If we could take into account not only relative material capabilities but also troop quality, leadership, and force employment capabilities we could arrive at more accurate predictions of war outcomes. But in addition to the conflicting empirical evidence, there are good theoretical reasons for questioning traditional assumptions about the relationship between war-fighting capacity and war outcomes.

To predict war outcomes from data on relative capabilities we must make the implicit assumption that both sides commit either the full force of their capabilities or at least equal proportions of their capabilities to the fight. And, in fact, the primary predictors in most war outcome models are factors like each state's industrial production, population, military expenditures, and troop strength in the year a war begins (Bennett and Stam 1998; Boulding 1963; Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Desch 2002; Lake 1992; Organski and Kugler 1980; Reiter and Stam 1998; Reiter and Stam 2002; Wayman, Singer and Goertz 1983). But these variables measure *potential* military power rather than *applied* military power. The proportional commitment assumption is reasonable enough in wars in which both sides value the issues at stake to a similar degree. But many wars are characterized by an imbalance in the interests the belligerents have at stake and, consequently, the resources they are willing to commit to the fight. And relative war-fighting capacity may change during the course of the war as resources are expended and replaced at uneven rates, strategic assets are seized, public support for the war effort constrains or enhances ability to commit resources to the fight, and the discipline and morale of the troops fluctuates. Consequently, even if a leader has a good sense of the balance of military capabilities between her state and the adversary's, there may be a great deal of uncertainty about what proportion of those capabilities

her state's military would confront on the battlefield. Dispassionate, fully rational individuals with complete information about the war-fighting capacity of two states could still disagree about the likely outcome of a war between them, unless we impose the unrealistic constraint that the war will be fought until one side's military capacity is completely annihilated.

Rationalist explanations for war assume that states initiate wars when their expected utility for war exceeds their expected utility for any available negotiated settlement and calculate the expected utility of war as the probability of victory (p) times the utility of victory (u) minus the cost of fighting (c). The core of the problem is that the probability of victory (p), the utility of victory (u), and the cost of victory (c) are not independent, but *interdependent* and *interactive*, making the equation incredibly difficult to solve, even with complete information about the distribution of power between two states. The probability of victory is dependent on not only a state's war-fighting capacity relative to that of the adversary, but also the cost in blood and treasure that would be incurred in prosecuting the war to victory against that adversary (c) and the state's utility for the issues at stake, because these factors determine the state's ability and willingness to commit sufficient resources to the conflict and to prosecute the conflict to victory. To make matters worse, the cost of prosecuting the war to victory is itself a function of relative war-fighting capabilities, and relative utility for the issues at stake. In order to understand how uncertainty affects the probability of war, we need to move beyond the assumption that war outcomes reflect the distribution of war-fighting capabilities.

A General Theory of War Outcomes

I. A Baseline Model of War Initiation and Termination

I construct a simple model of war initiation and termination as a framework for my theoretical arguments. In this model, two international actors are in conflict over some valued good (e.g. political authority, territory, or policy). These actors can select themselves into an armed conflict over the good by initiating the use of force or by reciprocating after an adversary has initiated the use of force. They can select themselves out by conceding to their adversary's demands or lowering their own demands to the point that a negotiated settlement with that adversary is possible (Goemans 2000; Filson and Werner

2004; Werner 1998). If neither side selects itself out of a war that has been initiated, one side or the other will eventually be rendered physically incapable of continuing to fight.

An actor's value for war is a function of that actor's subjective valuation of the disputed good ($0 < U < \infty$); the player's beliefs about the probability it could either hold, seize, or compel the other player to relinquish the disputed good through the use of military force ($0 < \text{pr}(V) < 1$); and the costs it expects it would incur in a war over the objective ($0 < C < 1$).

$$EU(\text{war}) = \text{pr}(V)(U) - C \quad (1)$$

Actors choose to use force if and only if their expected utility for war (Eq. 1) is greater than their utility for the status quo, which is set at zero for simplicity.

$$\text{pr}(V)(U) - C > 0 \quad (2)$$

An actor's value for the disputed good, U , can be measured in terms of the human, material, and opportunity costs that actor is willing to pay to attain or retain the good. Solving for U establishes the value of U as a threshold condition for both the initial choice to use military force and the recurring decision to continue fighting.

$$U > C / \text{pr}(V) \quad (3)$$

As long as the costs an actor is willing to bear to attain or retain the good exceed the anticipated costs of the war divided by the actor's expected probability of victory (Eq. 3), the actor will choose to initiate the use of military force or reciprocate with military force after being attacked in an effort to attain or retain the good.⁴ If, in the course of fighting, the actor's estimate of the cost of attaining the good increases, and/or the actor's estimate of the likelihood of victory decreases, the probability that the actor will withdraw from the fight also increases, all else equal.

II. War Outcomes

Victory and defeat in war have been defined in a variety of ways. Classic military victory is achieved when one actor degrades the other actor's military capacity to the point that it is no longer able

⁴ Actors will not tolerate costs, C , as high as their cost-tolerance threshold, U , unless their estimate of the probability of victory is one because U is the cost they are willing to bear to *attain* the good. Actual costs, C , must be lower than U if $\text{Pr}(V)$ is less than one.

to maintain organized resistance or to continue to pursue its own aims through force of arms. But wars rarely end with the total destruction of an enemy's military capacity (Smith 1998; Wagner 2000). Pursuit of total military victory is enormously costly, even for the victor, and there is generally some negotiated settlement short of one actor's complete annihilation that both sides would prefer to a war fought to the bitter end (Fearon 1995; Filson and Werner 2004).

Working from Equation 3 above as a threshold condition for the choice to initiate or terminate the use of military force, I derive the following propositions about the determinants of war outcomes.

Proposition 1. After hostilities have commenced, the likelihood that a state will accept an available negotiated settlement in order to terminate the fighting varies with changes in the state's estimate of the probability of victory (p) and/or the cost of sustaining the war to victory (c).

Proposition 2. As a state's estimate of p decreases and/or its estimate of c increases, the probability the state will select itself out of the fight by ceding all or part of the disputed good to its adversary increases.

A state can attain its political objectives in war by rendering its opponent physically incapable of continuing to fight (military victory). But a state can also attain its war aims by changing its opponent's beliefs about the *probability of military victory* or the *costs of fighting* so that the anticipated price of victory begins to exceed the price that adversary is willing to pay. Because there are multiple paths to political victory in war, military operations generally serve several purposes at once. Actors may use their military capacity to physically destroy their opponent's capacity to maintain organized resistance, to change their opponent's beliefs about the eventual outcome of a war fought to the finish, or to change their adversary's beliefs about the cost of continuing to fight. Often, a state's armed forces pursue all three objectives at once.

Each belligerent in an armed conflict possesses some quantity of the two primary determinants of war outcomes: *destructive capacity* and *tolerance for the costs of war*. An actor's destructive capacity is

the physical effect it can produce given the material resources and war-fighting capabilities of its armed forces. Factors like training, technology, leadership, military hardware, doctrine, tactics, and operational capabilities all affect the destructive capacity of an actor's military. In contrast, *cost-tolerance* is the extent to which an actor is *willing* to absorb the human and material costs imposed by an adversary and to bear the human, material, and opportunity costs of using force against that adversary to achieve its objectives (see Rosen 1972 for a similar definition). Many factors can affect an actor's willingness to bear the costs of fighting, including the existence of competing domestic and international priorities, public war-weariness or sensitivity to casualties, and the institutional accountability of political leaders. In general, however, an actor's cost-tolerance in a specific conflict is largely a function of that actor's subjective valuation of the issues at stake in the conflict. The more vital the interests at stake, whether to the security and prosperity of a nation-state, or to the survival of a political leader, the higher the costs an actor is willing to bear to secure those interests. In theory, cost-tolerance varies along a continuum from unwillingness to absorb any human or material costs in pursuit of an objective to the acceptance of any and all costs that must be borne in order to prevail.

When a conflict has escalated to violence, relative destructive capacity directly affects the probability each side will achieve its political objectives through its effect on the probability that one side will defeat the other militarily. All else equal, the greater an actor's destructive capacity relative to that of her opponent, the higher her probability of rendering that opponent physically incapable of defending himself or pursuing his war aims. And as a disparity in material resources or war-fighting capabilities makes the eventual outcome of a war more certain, the weaker actor may sue for peace long before it is physically incapable of continuing to fight in order to avoid the futility of expending resources and losing lives for a cause that cannot be won.

But relative destructive capacity can also affect war outcomes by partially determining the level of costs an actor can impose and his own vulnerability to his adversary's attempts to impose costs. Higher levels of material resources and war-fighting capabilities increase an actor's ability to inflict pain and suffering on her opponent. And better training, technology, leadership, equipment, and operational

capabilities decrease an actor's vulnerability to her adversary's attempts to impose costs. Militarily weak actors can expect to suffer a much higher rate of casualties and equipment loss than their militarily strong opponents.

An actor's level of cost-tolerance can affect both its ability to defeat an adversary militarily, and its ability to impose costs on that adversary, by acting as a constraint on the number of troops and resources that can be committed, military strategy and battlefield tactics, the level of risk to human life to be tolerated, the size of the conflict zone, the intensity of operations, and the modes of force employed. Moreover, each actor's cost-tolerance determines the point at which it will choose to make concessions or abandon its war aims to terminate the conflict. All else equal, the greater an actor's willingness to bear the costs of fighting to secure the interests at stake, the longer it can sustain its military operations, the more aggressive it can be in destroying the adversary's capability and imposing costs to degrade that enemy's will to continue the fight, and the more likely it is to eventually attain its objectives.

III. Uncertainty and War Outcomes

States fail to achieve their objectives in war when they *underestimate* the cost or *overestimate* the likelihood of victory and select themselves into wars they cannot sustain to victory. Both the militarily strong and the militarily weak, the highly cost-tolerant and the less resolved, select themselves into armed conflicts when they *believe* that the costs they are willing to bear to attain their objective exceed the cost of attaining the good through the use of force divided by the probability of victory. If they are correct, they prevail over their opponent and achieve their objective. If they are incorrect, they reach a point at which $C/Pr(V)$ exceeds U and they are better off ceding the good than continuing to fight. A state with little tolerance for the costs of war can prevail over a much more resolved state if its pre-war expectation that costs will be low is accurate. A rioting mob with no military capacity to speak of can attain its objectives vis-à-vis a superpower if it can absorb more pain than the strong state has the political capacity to impose.

Nothing an actor knows *ex ante* about its opponent's ability to impose or absorb costs should influence its decision to terminate the war after hostilities have begun. I assume that actors take what is

known prior to the war into consideration when they form their beliefs about the probability of victory and the cost of fighting and make the decision to use military force. Destructive capacity and tolerance for costs are important, but the essential intervening variable is *miscalculation* on the part of at least one of the actors. As a result, a crucial overlooked determinant of war outcomes is the degree of *uncertainty* about the odds of victory and the costs of war that exists for each actor prior to the decision to use military force.

Actors may be uncertain about the cost and/or the probability of victory because they do not have complete information about:

1. the latent destructive capacity of their adversary (and therefore the probability of outright military victory or defeat as well as the costs the adversary could impose);
2. the latent destructive capacity of their own state (and therefore the probability of outright military victory or defeat as well as the costs they could impose on the adversary);
3. their adversary's tolerance for costs (and therefore the proportion of capacity the adversary is willing to commit, the costs the adversary can impose, and the costs the adversary will accept before abandoning the war effort);
4. or their own state's tolerance for costs (and therefore the proportion of capacity they will be able to commit, the costs they can impose, and the costs they can accept before abandoning the war effort)

How difficult the task of estimating the probability and cost of victory is for leaders is likely to be dependent on a large number of factors. The extent and quality of information available to decisionmakers is dependent on the quality of a state's intelligence-gathering capabilities, the transparency of an adversary's government and society, and the extent to which state agents with relevant information (military leaders, diplomats, etc...) have the access and incentives to communicate such information to key decisionmakers. Presumably, more and better information allows leaders to form more accurate estimates of relative capabilities and resolve.

Testing Expectations about Uncertainty

As Slantchev (2004) notes, beliefs are unobservable. However, while the degree of uncertainty itself cannot be measured, we can test certain observable implications derived from a model in which uncertainty is a critical variable. Like Slantchev, I argue that *wars will be longer*, and *war initiators will be less likely to prevail*, when pre-war uncertainty is greatest.

Rationalist theories expect the degree of uncertainty to be lower when there is a large power disparity between states (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, and Zorick 1997; Reed 2003; Slantchev 2004). Power preponderance increases the accuracy of pre-war assessments. Leaders can still misestimate their own and/or their adversary's latent military capacity, but the errors are less likely to be great enough to fundamentally alter predictions about battlefield outcomes or the costs each side could impose on the other. In contrast, when states are at rough parity in terms of their war-fighting capacity, the outcome of a war is more sensitive to idiosyncratic decisions at the tactical or operational level; small differences in troop morale, leadership, or discipline; fluctuations in public support; logistical snafus; and all manner of what Clausewitz referred to as "friction" (Clausewitz 1976).

But I am most interested in sources of uncertainty beyond the traditional focus on the distribution of power. By restricting my cases to conflicts in which there is a large disparity in the belligerents' latent war-fighting capacity, I am able to remove uncertainty about relative war-fighting capacity as a major source of *ex-ante* misestimation of the probability and cost of victory in war. Strong states do not lose small wars because they are militarily defeated by weak adversaries, they select themselves out of the conflict when the expected cost begins to exceed the price they are willing to pay to achieve their war aims. Simplifying the problem in this way allows me to focus on the more theoretically interesting puzzle: How do materially strong states miscalculate the cost and/or probability of war and select themselves into fights they cannot sustain to victory?

Even in dyads in which capabilities are highly asymmetric, leaders are likely to have difficulty predicting the costs their adversary is willing to bear to attain their objectives and perhaps even their own state's tolerance for costs. My focus in this project is on how the nature of the issues at stake affects the accuracy of leaders' pre-war expectations in conflicts with much weaker opponents. I argue that, in

asymmetric wars, the nature of the strong state's primary political objective determines whether *relative destructive capacity* or *relative cost-tolerance* has a greater impact on the cost of victory. *Because leaders are more likely to have accurate estimates of relative destructive capacity than of relative cost-tolerance, we can expect estimates of the cost of victory to become less accurate as relative resolve becomes a more influential factor.* I develop a typology of political objectives that places the political objectives states pursue through the use of military on a continuum from *unilateral* to *dependent* based on the degree of *target compliance* required to attain the objective. As states become more dependent on target compliance to achieve their war aims, the *target's cost-tolerance* becomes a greater determinant of the cost of victory and *uncertainty* increases.

Political Objectives

I define a *political objective* as the allocation of a valued good (e.g. territory, political authority, or resources) sought by the political leaders of a state or of a non-state organization. When a political objective is pursued through the use of military force, I use the terms *war aim* and *political objective* interchangeably. States typically employ military force to achieve one of eight primary political objectives: to remove a foreign regime, to maintain a foreign regime, to change an adversary's foreign or domestic policy, to acquire territory, to defend territory, to maintain their political authority in a colony or client state, to deter aggression, or to impose peace (Sullivan 2004; also see Blechman and Kaplan 1978; Jones, Bremer et al. 1996; Werner 1998; Mitchell and Prins 1999). Examples include the U.S. intervention to overthrow the New Jewel regime in Grenada (regime change), French military operations in Chad to defend the government against threats from Libya and GUNT/FAP rebels during the 1980s (regime maintenance), China's seizure of Hainan Island in 1950 (seizure of territory), and U.S. attempts to gain Iraqi compliance with UN weapons inspections, 1992-2003 (policy change). While there are often myriad personal, domestic political, and grand strategic *motivations* for using military force, the desired political outcome of a military operation is generally more transparent. For example, despite persistent criticism that the objectives of the U.S. intervention in Indochina were ambiguous, the primary,

immediate-term political objective sought by the application of force was clear: an independent, non-communist South Vietnam

Political objectives can be contrasted with *military objectives*, which I define as the operational goals to be accomplished by the armed forces of a state or opposition movement for the purpose of achieving the desired political outcome. Examples include the attrition of enemy combatants, destruction of enemy military capacity, seizure of territory, disruption of enemy lines of command and control, and demoralization of enemy soldiers and/or civilians. Under some circumstances an actor's political objective and military objective are the same. A state may, for example, seek only to re-claim a piece of land along its border with another state. In this case, seizure of territory is both the political objective and the military objective although the state is likely to pursue other military objectives, like the attrition of enemy combatants or disruption of enemy command and control, as a means to the desired end.

I place the political objectives states pursue through the use of military on a continuum from *unilateral* to *dependent* based on the degree of *target compliance* required to attain the objective. Figure 1 illustrates this distinction.

Figure 1 about here.

Unilateral political objectives can be obtained by a strong actor without any need for target compliance because these objectives can be seized and held with overwhelming force alone. As Schelling (1966) notes, "Forcibly a country can repel and expel, penetrate and occupy, seize, exterminate, disarm and disable, confine, deny access, and directly frustrate intrusion or attack" (1). Prior to World War II, the Soviets overran Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and part of Finland. Germany absorbed Czechoslovakia, conquered Poland in less than three weeks, and, after only one year of fighting, occupied Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France as well. In the spring of 1950, China invaded Tibet and reasserted its authority over the autonomous province in just eighteen days. And on August 2, 1990 Iraq annexed the neighboring state of Kuwait. Resistance from the victims of these attacks was futile. A weak adversary's resistance can make seizing territory, plundering the land, or annexing the entire country more costly for a strong state. And actors almost always prefer to attain their objectives without having to

physically destroy their adversary. But a state that is strong enough can achieve these objectives without target compliance. If necessary, the target's armed forces can be completely destroyed or disarmed, making the strength of the target's will to resist and its tolerance for costs largely immaterial. As a result, despite the fact that Estonia, Poland, and Tibet faced the ultimate threat to vital state interests, all surrendered long before they were incapable of defending themselves.

In contrast, a state can only achieve *dependent* objectives if it can gain target compliance. A regime cannot be physically forced to change its foreign or domestic policies, a foreign power cannot forcibly seize compliance from a native population, and a dissatisfied ethnic minority group within a state cannot be physically forced to abandon its aims. If Actor A seeks a change in Actor B's behavior, Actor A must *persuade* Actor B to comply by manipulating the costs and benefits of compliance versus noncompliance. A suspect can be detained, deprived of physical comforts, threatened, and even tortured, but an interrogator cannot forcibly elicit words from the prisoner's mouth. The same is true when policy change is the objective of military intervention. Military force can raise the cost to an adversary of refusing to comply with a state's demands, but military force cannot change a regime's policy toward ethnic minorities within its borders or compel a government to stop sponsoring international terrorism. The target government must be convinced that compliance is less costly than resistance.

Most peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations are also primarily dependent in nature. The intervening state or coalition does not attempt to eliminate or even forcibly disarm either of the warring parties, but instead seeks to increase the costs and decrease the benefits of continuing to fight for one or both parties. When a state seeks to maintain the political authority of its own colonial regime, or that of an ally in a foreign territory, the objective falls somewhere in the middle of the continuum because it has both unilateral and dependent components. The state can attempt to erode the insurgent's *capacity* to fight, but the population of that territory must eventually be *persuaded* to withhold or terminate its support for the insurgency because elimination of the insurgent threat is not possible as long as popular support is sufficiently strong.

War Aims and Uncertainty

Modern military organizations are reasonably adept at estimating force requirements and even forecasting casualties for conventional campaigns involving direct combat to destroy enemy military forces. Battles and operations can be war-gamed, intelligence estimates of enemy capabilities can be analyzed, and complex strategies to seize the objective can be planned out in minute detail. Moreover, neither civilian political leaders nor their military advisors are likely to grossly underestimate the difficulty of seizing territory, overthrowing regimes, defending against an invading army, or conquering a neighboring state.

In contrast, there is much greater uncertainty about how *much* military force will be required, the *manner* in which force should be employed, and how *long* a campaign will need to be sustained when attainment of the primary political objective of an operation is dependent on attaining target compliance. The amount of coercive leverage an actor can derive from a fixed amount of destructive capacity is largely dependent on the target's willingness to absorb the costs imposed. The target, therefore, is largely in control of the extent to which achieving a dependent objective is costly for its opponent and can thwart a strong state's ability to attain a dependent objective simply by refusing to comply regardless of the level of destruction visited upon it. Since it does not need to win, or even fight, battles to accomplish this, it can avoid direct combat and frustrate a strong state's efforts to achieve a decisive military victory. But it is difficult to predict costs or plan military strategies with any type of precision when success is dependent upon reaching an inherently unknowable enemy "breaking point" (Mueller 1980). The resulting uncertainty increases the probability that strong states will select themselves into asymmetric wars they cannot sustain to victory.

Traditional *military* objectives like the attrition of enemy soldiers, destruction of enemy war-fighting material, and seizure of territory are closely aligned with the attainment of unilateral *political* objectives. The more dependent the objective, however, the more difficult it is to translate that political objective into operational military objectives and to establish a link between battlefield military effectiveness and overall strategic success. When powerful states underestimate the costs of a campaign to attain their political objectives, they risk being pushed beyond their cost tolerance threshold, and forced

to withdraw their forces, before they attain their war aims. A militarily strong state can discover that it has insufficient cost-tolerance to attain either unilateral or dependent objectives. But we are more likely to observe intervention failure when strong states have *dependent* objectives because states are more likely to *misestimate* the cost of achieving dependent objectives before choosing to use military force. As a result, the probability that a strong state will prevail over a weak target declines as the need for target compliance increases.

H₁: Militarily preponderant states are less likely to prevail and more likely to withdraw their troops in a given intervention-year when they have a primary political objective that is dependent on target compliance.

Because war-fighting is tremendously costly, I assume that states prefer short wars to long ones and attempt to select themselves out of not only losing wars, but also protracted ones. However, when uncertainty is high, as I argue it is when states pursue dependent political objectives, states should be more likely to select themselves into long, costly wars. At the same time, it will take longer for states' expectations about the cost and outcome of a war to converge when relative cost-tolerance plays a large role in determining the conduct and outcome of the war, as it does in wars with dependent political objectives. I therefore expect that unilateral objectives are attained more quickly than dependent objectives, decreasing the probability that an intervention with unilateral war aims will persist from one year to the next and shortening the average duration of military interventions with unilateral war aims.

H₂: The probability that a military intervention persists into another year increases the more the dependent the intervening state's primary political objective.

Research Design

Data. I test my hypotheses with an original data set of the universe of historical cases of foreign military intervention by the five major powers, Britain, China, France, the U.S., and the U.S.S.R/ Russia, during the period between 1945 and 2001.⁵ I define foreign military intervention as the foreign deployment of at least 500 combat-ready, regular military troops (ground, air, or naval) with the intent to

⁵ See Sullivan, P. (2004). *The Utility of Force: War Aims and Asymmetric War Outcomes*. Department of Political Science. Davis, University of California. Ph.D.: 235.

participate in hostile action against a target government or sub-state group for the purpose of achieving immediate-term political objectives. This definition excludes peacetime arms transfers, military aid, military training operations, the forward deployment of military troops, the evacuation of military or civilian personnel, and disaster relief.

Statistical Methods. I adopt a method of simultaneously modeling war outcome and war duration from Reiter and Stam (2002). In this model, the unit of analysis is the intervention-year and the dependent variable is the intervention-year outcome. In any given year of an intervention, three outcomes are possible: the intervening state can choose to withdraw from the war without attaining its primary political objective (withdraw), the intervening state can choose to sustain military operations into the next year (persist), or the intervening state can terminate the intervention after attaining its primary political objective (prevail). Prevail takes a value of one only when the intervening state attains its primary political objective and that objective is maintained for at least one year after the military intervention is terminated⁶, and zero otherwise. This coding rule was adopted so that only interventions which resulted in a meaningful foreign policy achievement were considered “successful”. The intervening state chooses to withdraw from the intervention in 13%, the state prevails over its adversary in 21%, and the intervention is sustained into another year in 66% of the 346 major power military intervention-years between 1945 and 2001.

The dependent variable in this analysis is categorical and I use multinomial logit estimation procedures. Using maximum likelihood estimation with a multinomial logit model calculates the odds of one war outcome (persist, prevail, or withdraw) versus another as follows:

$$\Omega_{m|n}(x) = \exp(x\beta_{m|n})$$

Where $\Omega_{m|n}(x)$ is the odds of dispute outcome m versus dispute outcome n given x , an array of values for our independent variables. $\beta_{m|n}$ is a vector of coefficients indicating the influence of each explanatory variable on the odds of dispute outcome m versus n (Long 1997).

⁶ The date of intervention termination is the date that (1) a peace treaty or other agreement between the parties ends the intervening state’s combat role, or (2) the intervening state has reduced its combat troop levels to no more than 30% of their level at the height of the conflict.

Structuring the data in this way allows for the possibility that an independent variable affects the odds of sustaining an operation versus withdrawing from the conflict differently than the odds of prevailing versus withdrawing. An independent variable could increase both the probability that the primary political objective is attained in a given intervention-year *and* the probability that the intervening state withdraws without attaining its objective in that intervention-year, while decreasing the probability that intervention persists into the next year. Other variables might increase both the probability of sustaining an operation and the probability of withdrawing, while decreasing the probability that that the intervening state prevails in a given intervention year.

Explanatory Variables

Primary Political Objective. The key explanatory variable is the degree to which the intervening state's primary political objective is dependent versus unilateral. In order to facilitate rigorous coding of the political objective of each military operation, I created political objective categories based on an historical analysis of approximately one quarter of the cases. I then used a team of four research assistants to research the political objectives of the major power state in each intervention and to code each case according to the category that best represented the state's primary war aim. I create a dichotomous measure of the nature of the intervening state's primary political objective by dividing the political objectives states pursue through the use of force into two categories – those that can be seized and held with military force alone (unilateral objectives) and those that can only be attained if the target chooses to comply (dependent objectives). Removing a regime, acquiring territory, defending territory, and deterring a foreign adversary from pursuing territorial acquisition or regime change are coded as unilateral objectives. Maintaining the regime authority of a foreign or colonial government, changing an adversary's foreign or domestic policies, and peacemaking are all coded as dependent objectives.

Target Type. Since the termination of the United State's unsuccessful intervention in Vietnam, a substantial volume of case study literature has maintained that fighting non-state actors like guerilla insurgencies is especially difficult for large conventional armies (Downie 1998; Gates 1993; Krepinevich 1986; Levite, Jentleson and Berman 1992; Record and Terrill 2004; Sarkesian 1990). I expect this is

because an intervening state's success is partially dependant upon the extent to which its target has assets that are 1) essential to its physical and/or political capacity to sustain the war effort, and 2) susceptible to the attacker's destructive capacity. State targets may be more vulnerable to military coercion than non-state actors like terrorist organizations, insurgents, or opposition political movements because states have strategic assets (defensible terrain, military installations, troops, equipment) and material values (cities, industrial and communications centers, transportation systems) that can be easily destroyed, degraded, or captured by the armed forces of strong states. Terrorists and guerilla armies have small, mobile strategic assets, limited resource requirements, and unsophisticated leadership, supply, and communication infrastructure. A dummy variable indicates that the target was not a state. Forty-five percent of the targets in the major power military interventions since 1945 were non-state actors.

Regime Type. Recent research has provided evidence that democracies select wars that are shorter and less costly, and that they are more likely to win the wars they fight (Bennett and Stam 1998; Reiter and Stam 1998, 2002; Siverson 1995). On the other hand, several scholars have recently argued that democratic states are especially prone to losing "small wars" because weak adversaries can exploit the casualty sensitivity or humanitarian sensibilities of democratic publics (Byman and Waxman 2002; Merom 2003). If democratic governments are more selective about the circumstances under which they will use military force, democratic major powers should be more likely than non-democratic major powers to attain their objectives in a given intervention-year and interventions initiated by democracies should be shorter than interventions initiated by non-democratic states. If, on the other hand, democratic governments are particularly sensitive to the costs of war, they may be more likely to withdraw their military forces and less likely to attain their objectives in a given intervention year. I use the Polity IV data set to obtain a measure of major power regime type by subtracting a regime's autocracy score from its democracy score to produce a 21-point scale (Marshall and Jaggers 2002).

Troop Commitment. Asymmetric conflicts are characterized by vast asymmetries in, not only capabilities, but also interests at stake, and, by extension, the proportion of total capabilities each side is willing to commit to the conflict. I control for the degree of major power resource commitment by

including a dichotomous variable that indicates that the intervening state committed at least ten thousand troops to the intervention. Fourteen percent of the cases involve fewer than 1000 troops, in twenty-two percent between 1000 and 5000 troops are deployed, and in twelve percent of the cases troop numbers fall between 5001 and 10,000. In a slight majority of interventions (53%), more than ten thousand troops are deployed to the conflict location at some time during the intervention.

Counterintervention. States make the decision to use military force to attain their objectives when they believe the price they are willing to pay to secure those objectives exceeds the human, material, and opportunity costs of attaining those objectives by force. When making projections about the cost and likelihood of victory in war, they take into consideration any assistance they expect to receive from allies as well as any help their adversary is likely to receive. For this reason, neither the military contributions an intervening state receives from coalition partners nor target allies that are expected to help the target before the war begins should influence intervening state's ability to attain its objectives once the war is underway. If, however, the target of a state's military operations receives military assistance that the state failed to anticipate before hostilities commenced, it may be forced to revise its estimate of the probability of prevailing and the cost of victory when that assistance arrives. I expect that in any given intervention-year intervening states will be more likely to withdraw their troops without attaining their primary political objective, less likely to sustain their military operations into another year, and less likely to prevail if a rival major power intervenes in the conflict after hostilities commence. I create a variable to indicate direct military assistance provided to the target by another major power (counterintervention).

Relative military capabilities: Recent research has refined the concept of military power, but measures of military capabilities continue to hold a prominent position in theories of war outcomes (Bennett and Stam 1998; Biddle 2004; Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Reiter and Stam 1998; Stam 1996). The prevailing expectation is that the probability a state will achieve a quick victory over its opponent increases with increases in that state's military capacity relative to that of its opponent. The intervening state's military strength relative to that of the target is calculated as the ratio of the major power's

military-industrial capabilities to the combined capabilities of the two sides with data from the Correlates of War National Capabilities Index (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972; Jones, et. al. 1996). Unlike conflicts between more evenly matched opponents, in conflicts between adversaries with disparate levels of military might, *ex ante* miscalculations of relative capabilities are nearly impossible. I therefore anticipate that measures of military strength that are observable to both parties will not be significant predictors of asymmetric war outcomes.

Time. Intervention-year outcomes may be duration dependent in the sense that the length of time that an intervention has been ongoing affects the probability that the intervening state will attain its objectives or withdraw its troops in a given intervention-year (Reiter and Stam 2002). Interventions that have been ongoing for many years may be less likely to terminate in either outcome and more likely to persist into another year. Alternatively, intervening states may become more likely to withdraw their troops without attaining their objectives over time. I control for time by including a variable that indicates how many years the interventions has been ongoing for each intervention-year. I log the variable because I expect time to have a diminishing effect the longer an intervention has been ongoing. Because I am also interested in whether conflict duration affects democracies differently than nondemocracies, I also create an interaction term by multiplying the log of years by the regime type variable.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of a multinomial logit estimation of an equation predicting the outcome of each of the major power military intervention-years since World War II. There are two sets of coefficient estimates. Coefficients in the first column estimate the effect of each of the independent variables on the probability that the intervention persists into another year rather than ending because the intervening state attained its war aims. In the second column, coefficients indicate the effects of the independent variable on the likelihood that the intervention terminates when the intervening state withdraws from the intervention, compared to the likelihood that the intervening state prevails. Positive coefficients indicate that increases in a given variable raise the likelihood of a given intervention-year

outcome, relative to the base category, while negative coefficients signify that the variable decreases the likelihood of that outcome, relative to the base category (attain). Estimates of the effects of each of the explanatory variables on the probability of withdraw vs. persist can be attained directly from these coefficient estimates.

Table 1. Multinomial Logit Analysis of Intervention-Year Outcomes

	Persist vs. Prevail	Withdraw vs. Prevail
Dependent Political Objective	0.962 (0.364)***	1.586 (0.505)***
More than 10,000 troops	0.190 (0.324)	-0.029 (0.429)
Counterintervention	1.710 (1.195)	3.497 (1.188)***
State Target	-0.600 (0.402)	-0.603 (0.517)
Proportion of Capabilities	3.093 (2.600)	0.255 (2.863)
Democracy	0.328 (0.457)	-0.459 (0.559)
ln(year)	0.498 (0.328)	-1.197 (0.625)*
Democracy * ln(year)	0.548 (0.403)	1.645 (0.696)**
Constant	-3.233 (2.640)	-1.130 (2.886)
Observations	346	

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

Although several of the explanatory variables are not statistically significant, the fit of the model is reasonably good. The model correctly predicts 73% of intervention-year outcomes, 21% more than can be predicted by choosing the modal outcome category, persist. Hausman tests of the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA) assumption indicate that all three outcome categories are independent of other alternatives. Likelihood ratio tests confirm that none of the outcome categories should be combined.

Because multinomial logit estimation produces multiple coefficient estimates for each independent variable -- one for the effect of the variable on the likelihood of one outcome category relative to another for every possible category pairing -- it is difficult to determine the statistical significance of a particular variable directly from the coefficient and standard error estimates reported in the model. For example, a variable may have an insignificant effect on the probability that a state will withdraw versus persist, but significantly effect the probability of withdrawing versus prevailing in a particular intervention year. To address this problem, I conduct a series of likelihood-ratio tests. Each LR test compares the log likelihood from the full model to the log likelihood from a constrained model in which one independent variable is excluded. The null hypothesis is that all coefficients associated with the excluded variable(s) are zero. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Likelihood-ratio tests of the null hypothesis that all coefficients associated with a given variable are zero.

Independent Variable	chi ²	P>chi ²
Dependent Political Objective	12.025	0.002
More than ten thousand troops	0.552	0.759
Counterintervention	13.136	0.001
State Target	2.405	0.300
Relative Capabilities	1.733	0.420
Regime Type	2.396	0.302
Log of intervention year	15.486	0.000
Democracy * ln(intervention year)	6.772	0.034

Only the nature of the intervening state's primary political objective, counterintervention by a rival major power, time, and the variable interactive time and the major power's regime type have a statistically significant effect on intervention-year outcomes. In a model that does not control for the nature of the intervening state's primary political objective, a dummy variable indicating whether the intervention target is a state or a nonstate actor is significantly correlated with the likelihood of persisting, prevailing, or withdrawing in a given intervention year. Major power states are twice as likely to prevail, and interventions are 33% less likely to persist into the next year when the target is another state. However, the effect of target type is no longer statistically significant after controlling for the nature of the strong state's political objective. Target type may no longer be significant in models which control for

the intervening state's primary political objective because target type and political objective type are themselves correlated at .657. The targets of military campaigns with dependent political objectives are more likely to be nonstate actors like guerilla armies or civilian rioters, while the target of operations with unilateral are more likely to be other states. While this raises the concern that the coefficients measuring the effect of political objective type are primarily measuring the effect of target type, the dummy variable indicating the nature of the political objective being pursued by the major power state retains its statistical significance and the strength of its effects are only marginally diminished by the inclusion of a variable indicating whether the target is a state or nonstate actor.

The relative capabilities variable, which is the ratio of major power military-industrial capabilities to the combined capabilities of the target and the major power intervener, does not have a significant effect on intervention-year outcomes. This result is not surprising because we should not expect measures of capabilities that are observable to both parties before they decide to escalate a conflict to war to affect decisions about terminating or persisting in the war after it has begun. Somewhat more surprisingly, there is also no correlation between intervention-year outcomes and either a continuous variable indicating the number of major power military troops deployed at the height of the intervention, or the dummy variable indicating that more than ten thousand troops were deployed.

Table 3 shows how the predicted probability of each of the three intervention-year outcomes changes as the value of each statistically significant explanatory variable changes. All changes in predicted probability are calculated when all other variables are held constant at their mean value. Dichotomous independent variables are changed from zero to one and continuous independent variables are varied one standard deviation, centered on the variable's mean.

Table 3. Changes in the predicted probability of each intervention-year outcome.

Explanatory Variable	Pr(persist)	Pr(withdraw)	Pr(prevail)
Dependent Political Objective	+08	+08	-.15
Counterintervention	-.20	+.35	-.14
Log of Intervention Year	+.20	-.17	-.03

Democracy * ln(intervention year)	-0.03	+12	-0.09
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Because uncertainty about the probability and cost of victory is highest when states are dependent on target compliance to attain their war aims, my hypotheses predicted that military interventions would be longer and less successful when states used military force to attain dependent political objectives. Although uncertainty is unobservable, the results of this analysis are consistent with these predictions. The probability that an intervening state will attain its war aim in a given intervention-year decreases 15% when the intervening state pursues a dependent political objective. At the same time, the probability that the state will withdraw increases 8%. Finally, major power military interventions are 8% more likely to persist into another year when the intervening state must coerce the target into compliance in order to attain its war aims.

When a rival major power intervenes on behalf of the target of a major power military operation, the probability of withdrawal dramatically increases and the probability that the initial intervening state either attains its war aims or sustains its military operations into another year drops precipitously. In the average intervention year, the probability that a state will abandon its objectives and unilaterally withdraws its military forces is less than 12%. If a rival major power intervenes in the conflict, the probability of withdrawal in the average intervention year shoots up to almost 50%. At the same time, the probability of prevailing in the average intervention year decreases from 16% to less than 3% when a rival major power intervenes and all other variables are held constant at their mean. The results are both intuitive and instructive. When making the decision to use military force to achieve a foreign policy objective major power states rely on estimates of both the probability of attaining their objectives and the cost of doing so. When costs are sufficiently low and the probability of victory is sufficiently high, the expected utility of war can exceed the value of the status quo even when the utility of the objective is only moderate. And strong states can expect that their costs will be relatively low when their target is a militarily weak state or non-state actor. However, when a rival with military capabilities comparable to its own commits troops, a major power is likely to lower its estimate of the probability of victory and

radically increase its estimate of the cost of attaining its objectives. When the calculus changes this dramatically, states are likely to quickly seek an exit strategy.

Finally, the results of this analysis indicate that intervention-year outcomes are time-dependent, and that the effect of time varies with the regime type of the intervening state. The longer an intervention has persisted, the more likely it is that a nondemocratic state will continue to prosecute the war into another year. However, democratic states become less likely to persist and more likely to withdraw the longer an intervention has been ongoing. Both democracies and nondemocracies become less likely to prevail as time passes. These results are consistent with previous findings that suggest that democracies are particularly sensitive to the human and material costs of war and support for war declines as the war continues (Bennett and Stam 1998; Mueller 1973; Gartner and Segura 1998).

Uncertainty in Practice

The results of the statistical analysis reported above are consistent with my theoretical expectations. I argue that powerful states are more likely to unilaterally withdraw from foreign military interventions short of victory when the state's decision-makers initially *underestimate* the cost of achieving their political objectives through the use of force, and that the risk of underestimating the cost of sustaining a military operation to victory *ex ante* is highest when strong states pursue dependent war aims. But the quantitative data do not allow me to actually measure uncertainty. Nor can I use the statistical analysis to demonstrate that the intervening states are choosing to withdraw their troops without attaining their war aims because they initially underestimated the cost of fighting and selected themselves into wars they could not sustain to victory. However, a closer examination of the U.S. cases, provides further support for my argument. The United States conducted thirty-four military interventions between 1946 and 2002. In many cases, including the American interventions in Grenada, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, the U.S. attained a quick, decisive victory. If anything, troop requirements and casualties were overestimated. However, the U.S. failed to achieve its primary political objective in ten of those interventions. The withdrawal from Somalia after the death of 16 Army Rangers appears to be an extreme case, but it is consistent with every other case of failure; military operations ended with the

U.S. unilaterally withdrawing its troops before attaining its primary political objective despite the fact that its military capacity was at most only marginally degraded in the conflict. Moreover, in each case, political leaders were faced with unexpectedly high costs.

The American intervention in Lebanon from September 29, 1982 to February 26, 1984 illustrates the pattern. On September 14, 1982, the president of Lebanon was assassinated and Israeli Defense Forces moved into Beirut to subdue Shiite opposition forces. Two days later, a Lebanese Christian militia began massacring Palestinian refugees at camps in Southern Lebanon. In response, President Reagan deployed 1200 U.S. marines to Beirut to serve as part of a multinational force "with the mission of enabling the Lebanese government to resume full sovereignty over its capital—the essential precondition for extending its control over the entire country."⁷ As the marines landed, the administration claimed that the troops would not have a combat role and would be there for only a "limited period of time".⁸ However, over the next seventeen months, the administration greatly escalated the U.S. role in the conflict, more than doubling the number of troops deployed to the region and gradually approving greater and greater uses of force to defend Marine positions and to support operations by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Throughout this time Congress, and, by extension, the American public, was kept largely in the dark about the role of U.S. forces in the region.

From the beginning, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were notably less optimistic about the costs and risks of U.S. intervention in Lebanon. Weinberger opposed sending in the Marines, arguing that the mission was ill-defined and quite possibly unattainable. The Joint Chiefs complained that it would be difficult to estimate force strength and capability requirements or to determine effective rules of engagement given the ambiguous nature of U.S. objectives. While Secretary of State George Shultz estimated that the U.S. would need about five thousand troops to secure its objectives, Weinberger estimated troop requirements at three to four times that number. Weinberger saw the small, lightly armed contingent of Marines deployed to Lebanon as insufficient, and the airport

⁷ The New York Times Sept. 20, 1982

⁸ The New York Times Sept. 29, 1982.

where they were deployed as indefensible. On August 25, 1983, Weinberger and the JCS sent Reagan a memo arguing that U.S. troops should be pulled out of Lebanon.

As Reagan authorized the expansion of target sets and relaxed rules of engagement to allow U.S. forces to provide direct military assistance to Lebanese Army units, the marines inevitably became targets for opposition forces. In September of 1983, the National Security Council approved an expansion of the U.S. military role, authorizing American warships to fire at Druze forces attacking Lebanese army positions, and an additional 2000 Marines were deployed to carriers off the Lebanese coast. The suicide bomb attack that killed 241 U.S. marines and soldiers at the U.S. Marine's Beirut Airport headquarters on October 23, 1983 unequivocally demonstrated that the militias perceived the U.S. as a combatant in the war and that the militants were cost-tolerant enough to pick a fight with an overwhelmingly stronger adversary. The Pentagon strongly advised against retaliation for the attack, believing it would only exacerbate the situation (Perry 1989). However, instead of concluding at that point that achieving U.S. war aims would not be worth the cost of victory, the National Security Council continued to expand Marine, naval surface, and air attacks on Druze and Shiite positions over the next three and a half months. Herspring (2005) notes that, according to the president's NSC advisor, Weinberger initially refused to carry out the orders issued in NSDD 111, which expanded the Marines' rules of engagement.

President Reagan worried that withdrawing from Lebanon would be seen as a sign of weakness by U.S. adversaries. But the evidence also suggests that the administration failed to appreciate the value of the issues at stake for the Druze and Shiite militias. This failure led, in turn, to an underestimation of the adversary's tolerance for costs, the costs that the adversary was willing to impose, and the costs the adversary was willing to accept before abandoning the war effort. After the attack on the marine barracks, Reagan was forced to admit that the U.S. military was "inadequately equipped" to combat "state sponsored terrorism."⁹ In January 1984, Speaker of the House Thomas O'Neill accused the president of misleading Congress with overly optimistic statements about diplomatic progress in Lebanon and House

⁹ Facts For Your Files: A Chronology of U.S.-Middle East Relations. Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. January 23, 1984, Page 6.

democrats drafted a resolution calling for a “prompt and orderly withdrawal” from Lebanon.¹⁰ On February 1, the House passed a resolution calling for a “prompt and orderly withdrawal” of U.S. troops. Later that month, after one last escalation of the U.S. effort, President Reagan finally conceded that the multinational forces of which the U.S. was a part could not enforce the peace in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Despite their immense war-fighting capacity, major power states have failed to attain their primary political objective in almost 40% of their military operations against weak state and non-state targets since 1945. Previous theories of asymmetric war outcomes suggest that strong states should be most likely to fail when their absolute tolerance for costs is lowest or when the gap between their tolerance for costs and the cost-tolerance of their adversary is greatest (Mack 1975, Rosen 1972, Maoz 1983). But powerful states do not lose small wars simply because they have low absolute or relative levels of cost-tolerance. The cost-tolerance of strong states does not need to exceed or even match that of their weak targets in order to prevail over them because their strength ensures that the human and material costs of war will be borne much more heavily by the target. In fact, I find that strong states are *most* likely to succeed in overthrowing a foreign regime or acquiring territory, where we can assume the issues at stake for the target are extraordinarily salient.

The military operations of powerful states are likely to fail only if the state’s decision-makers initially *underestimate the cost of achieving their objectives*. Actors select themselves into armed conflicts only when their pre-war estimate of the cost of forcibly attaining their objectives falls below the threshold of their tolerance for costs. The more the actual costs of victory exceed a state’s pre-war expectations, the greater the risk that it will be pushed beyond its cost-tolerance threshold and forced to unilaterally withdraw its forces before it attains its war aims. The key relationship, then, is not the distance between the strong state’s cost-tolerance threshold and the cost-tolerance of a weak adversary,

¹⁰ New York Times, January 25, 1984; Facts For Your Files: A Chronology of U.S.-Middle East Relations. Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. February 20, 1984, Page 6.

but the distance between the *price the strong state is willing to pay* and the *actual human and material cost* of attaining its political objectives through the use of force.

The approach I advocate does not discount the role of war-fighting capacity. But my expectations about the effect of a strong state's advantage in relative military capabilities on asymmetric war outcomes run counter to conventional wisdom. Unlike conflicts between more evenly matched opponents, in conflicts between adversaries with disparate levels of military might, *ex ante* miscalculations of relative capabilities are nearly impossible. In general, conflicts between the very strong and the very weak are likely to get resolved peacefully because the weak back down, making concessions to the strong to avoid escalation of the conflict to a military contest they know they could not win (Fearon 1995). When the weak do not back down, however, it is generally because they believe they possess some less observable quality that will allow them to prevail (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow and Zorick 1997). The approach advanced here suggests that this quality is extraordinarily high tolerance for costs.

I argue that the relative magnitude of the effect of military capabilities versus resolve varies with the nature of the object at stake and that strong states become more likely to underestimate the cost of victory as the impact of resolve increases relative to that of war-fighting capacity. Uncertainty, and, as a result, the risk of underestimating the cost of sustaining a military operation to victory, is highest when strong states pursue objectives that can only be attained with a weak target's compliance.

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Figure 1. Typology of Political Objectives



