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Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars

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Why are states with tremendous advantages in capabilities and resources often unable to attain even limited objectives vis-à-vis much weaker adversaries? The theory I develop focuses on how the nature of a strong state's war aims affects prewar uncertainty about the cost of victory. I argue that the relative magnitude of the effect of military strength and resolve on war outcomes 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. I evaluate the empirical implications of this theory against the historical record provided by the universe of major power military interventions since World War II. The results challenge both existing theories and conventional wisdom about the impact of factors such as military strength, resolve, troop commitment levels, and war-fighting strategies on asymmetric war outcomes.

Keywords: *asymmetric war; military intervention; use of force; war outcomes*

When do militarily powerful states achieve their foreign policy objectives through the use of force? What conditions limit the utility of military force as an instrument of statecraft? Why do strong states lose small wars?

The present state of our knowledge about the determinants of war outcomes presents a puzzle. Recent scholarly work in this area suggests that victory and defeat in war are best explained by the balance of military capabilities (industrial production, troop strength, training, technology) and the belligerents' force employment strategies (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Bennett and Stam 1998; Biddle 1996, 2004; Gartner and Siverson 1996; Millett, Murray, and Watman 1988; Reiter and Stam 1998, 2002; Stam 1996). But these factors cannot explain why states with tremendous advantages in

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capabilities and resources are frequently unable to attain even limited objectives when they use military force against much weaker states. Strong states possess superior technology, better tactical capabilities, higher quality leadership, a wider range of options for delivering firepower, and vastly greater resources and production capabilities than their weak adversaries. Moreover, while it is plausible that powerful states lose wars to weak actors because they employ the wrong military strategy (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Krepinevich 1986; Pape 1996; Stam 1996; Summers 1982), extant theories cannot explain why militarily preponderant states regularly make poor strategy choices. Although the weak may not have the war-fighting capacity to choose an optimal strategic response to their adversary's military strategy, strong states do have that capacity. And theoretically, a losing strategy could be exchanged for a winning one if it becomes clear that the initial strategy is ineffective (Gartner 1997).

In the decade after the U.S. withdrawal from the war in Vietnam, scholars attempted to explain cases in which the materially weak prevailed over the materially strong by pointing to the imbalance of resolve that frequently exists between actors with disparate levels of military capacity (Mack 1975; Mueller 1980; Rosen 1972). This perspective is intuitively appealing, and resolve is clearly a piece of the puzzle. But existing theories about the relationship between resolve and war outcomes tend to be nothing more than post hoc explanations for otherwise perplexing conflict outcomes (Baldwin 1979). How can we explain why strong states achieve their objectives vis-à-vis weak actors in some instances but do not in others if weak targets always have more at stake? When are militarily weak but resolute actors likely to prevail over militarily mighty but irresolute states?

In an effort to begin answering these questions, I develop a theory of asymmetric war outcomes and evaluate its empirical implications against the historical record provided by the universe of major power military interventions since World War II. In contrast to existing models of war outcomes, the theory I develop focuses on how the nature of a strong state's war aims affects the level of prewar uncertainty about the cost of attaining those objectives through the use of military force. In the model I present, strong states select themselves into armed conflicts only when their prewar estimate of the cost of attaining their political objectives through the use of force falls below the threshold of their tolerance for costs. The more the actual costs of victory exceed a state's prewar 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. I then argue that a central characteristic of war aims—the degree to which attaining them requires target compliance—determines whether military capabilities (destructive capacity) or resolve (cost tolerance) has a greater impact on the human and material cost of victory for militarily strong states. Because the extent of an adversary's cost tolerance is less directly observable than an adversary's destructive capacity, we can expect prewar estimates of the cost of victory to become less accurate as the effect of resolve increases relative to the effect of military 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 political objectives that can only be attained with a weak target's compliance.

This study compares across a diverse range of cases—from wars between states over claims to territory to counterinsurgency operations against guerilla armies—to uncover systematic relationships between war aims and war outcomes. The empirical results challenge both existing theories and conventional wisdom about the impact of factors such as military strength, resolve, troop commitment levels, and war-fighting strategies on asymmetric war outcomes. Major power states have failed to attain their primary political objective in 39 percent of the military interventions they have initiated since World War II. But strong states are not militarily defeated by their weak adversaries. They choose to terminate their military operations without attaining their political objectives when they decide that the cost of victory will exceed the price they are willing to pay to secure those objectives. The militarily weak are likely to be much more cost-tolerant than the militarily strong in the asymmetric wars we observe. But the strength of a target's resolve is unlikely to compensate for its material weakness when a much stronger adversary pursues an objective it can seize and hold with physical force alone. As a strong state becomes more dependent on a change in the target's behavior, however, a weak target's advantage in tolerance for costs can mitigate the effectiveness of military might. As a result, we see that strong states are most likely to succeed in forcibly removing an adversarial regime from power, where we can assume that the issues at stake for the target are extraordinarily salient, and least likely to convince a weak target to change an objectionable policy.

The Existing Literature on War Outcomes

The assumption that military strength largely determines conflict outcomes underpins a large body of research in international relations. For example, while disagreeing about whether power parity or preponderance leads to war, both balance of power (Claude 1964; Waltz 1979; Wright 1965) and power preponderance theorists (Blainey 1973; Organski and Kugler 1980) implicitly agree that the balance of military capabilities between two states is the primary determinant of war outcomes. However, the empirical evidence of a direct relationship between relative material capabilities and war outcomes is mixed. Cannizzo (1980) reports that the state with the largest military won all but nine of the thirty wars between two states from 1816 to 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" (p. 247). The results of empirical tests reported by Bueno de Mesquita (1981) and Stam (1996) indicate that military power is an important predictor of success in war. However, Bueno de Mesquita (2000) notes that the less powerful state prevailed in 41 percent of the wars in the last 200 years.

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 such as 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, 2002; Wayman, Singer, and Goertz 1983). But these variables measure potential military power rather than applied military power. A 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.

Some recent literature has looked beyond latent material capabilities to bring attention to the manner in which military force is employed. Biddle (2004) provides convincing evidence that force employment—the doctrine and tactics according to which forces are used in combat—mediates the relationship between material strength and victory and defeat in battle. Stam (1996) distinguishes among maneuver, attrition, and punishment strategies, arguing that the interaction of two or more states' military strategies plays an important role in determining war outcomes because of the effect this interaction has on the costs the two sides must bear in the fighting. Pape (1996) also makes the case that some military strategies are more effective than others. The author examines various strategies for the use of air power and provides evidence that "punishment" strategies, in which the goal is to break the morale of an enemy, are less effective than "denial" strategies, in which the aim is to "thwart the target state's military strategy for controlling the objectives in dispute" (p. 10). Finally, Arreguín-Toft (2001) develops a theory of asymmetric conflict outcomes, arguing that strong states lose asymmetric conflicts when they employ the wrong military strategy in relation to their weak opponent's strategy. However, these theories cannot explain why or predict when powerful states make poor strategy choices. If there is an optimal strategic response to an adversary's strategy, why don't materially capable states always employ this strategy?[1]

A number of scholars have attempted to explain cases in which the materially weak prevail over the materially strong by acknowledging the imbalance of resolve or cost tolerance that frequently exists between actors with disparate levels of military capacity. Rosen (1972) maintains that the willingness to absorb costs can play an important role in the ability of a state to prevail in a conflict. A weak actor "may compensate for an opponent's strength, his ability to harm," he argues, "by a greater willingness to be harmed" (p. 169). Similarly, observing a number of cases of failed counterinsurgency operations, Mack (1975) notes, "In every case, success for the

insurgents arose not from a military victory on the ground . . . but rather from the progressive attrition of their opponents' *political* capability to wage war" (p. 177). Maoz (1983) tests a capability model against a resolve model and finds that only the variables measuring resolve are consistently related to dispute outcomes. And case studies of individual conflicts often attribute otherwise puzzling conflict outcomes to an imbalance of resolve or "asymmetry of motivation" between the combatants (e.g., George and Simons 1994).

But current theories lack *ex ante* measures of relative resolve and cannot tell us when the militarily strong actor is likely to prevail, and when it likely to abandon its war aims in the face of a militarily weak but resolute actor. How are policymakers to know if a military campaign is destined to fail because of an "asymmetry of motivation" before the troops are sent?

In the model I present below, I assume that the resolve (i.e., cost-tolerance) of strong states does not need to exceed or even match that of their weak adversaries because their strength ensures that the human and material costs of war will be borne much more heavily by their weak opponents. This does not mean that resolve is irrelevant. The key metric, however, is not the gap between the strong state's cost-tolerance threshold and the cost tolerance of its weak adversary, but the gap 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. When a state's prewar estimate of the cost of victory is too low, there is a higher risk that it will select itself into a war it does not have the resolve to sustain to victory.

I begin with a simple model of war initiation and termination grounded in recent work that sees war as a bargaining process (Fearon 1995; Filson & Werner 2002; Goemans 2000; Powell 2004; Slantchev 2003; Smith & Stam 2005; Stam 1996; Wagner 2000; Werner 1998). I then develop the implications of this model for the balance of military capabilities and resolve in asymmetric wars and introduce war aims as a key variable determining asymmetric war outcomes.

A General Theory of War Outcomes

A state can attain its political objectives in war by rendering its opponent physically incapable of continuing to fight (i.e., 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 (Clausewitz 1976; Goemans 2000; Smith & Stam 2005). Because there are multiple paths to political victory in war, military operations generally serve several purposes. 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 (Wagner 2000). Often, an actor's armed forces pursue all three military 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 such as training, technology, leadership, military hardware, doctrine, tactics, and operational capabilities all affect the destructive capacity of an actor's military (Biddle 2004; Millett, Murray, and Watman 1988; Stam 1996). The term *cost tolerance* is defined as 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, 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 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 being equal, the greater an actor's destructive capacity relative to that of its opponent, the higher that actor's probability of rendering the opponent physically incapable of defending itself or pursuing its own war aims. And because 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 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 the actor's own vulnerability to an adversary's attempts to impose costs (Stam 1996). Higher levels of material resources and war-fighting capabilities increase an actor's ability to inflict pain and suffering on its opponent. And better training, technology, leadership, equipment, and operational capabilities decrease an actor's vulnerability to its adversary's attempts to impose costs. Militarily weak actors can expect to suffer casualties and equipment loss at a much higher rate 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 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 being 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 and 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.

The Balance of Destructive Capacity and Cost Tolerance in Asymmetric Wars

Asymmetric wars are armed conflicts in which one actor has the destructive capacity to threaten the physical survival of the other actor but the reverse is not true because of a disparity in military capabilities that greatly favors one actor over the other. Because of the process of mutual selection that drives the escalation of conflicts to war, the militarily asymmetric wars we observe are also likely to be characterized by an asymmetry in cost tolerance that favors the militarily weak actor.

A weak actor poses no threat to the survival of a strong state and only rarely presents a significant threat to truly vital interests, but the militarily strong have the ability to completely disarm and even annihilate their weak adversaries. Moreover, no matter how optimistic they are about the eventual outcome of a war with a strong opponent, weak actors are unlikely to underestimate the devastation that could be wrought by a militarily preponderant state if a conflict between them were to escalate to war. As a result, weak actors tend to select themselves into military contests with much stronger adversaries—either by initiating the use of force or refusing to make the concessions that would avert an armed confrontation—only when their value for the issues at stake and their tolerance for costs are extraordinarily high.

A state with a considerable capability advantage over its opponent, on the other hand, can choose to escalate a conflict to violence with a much lower cost-tolerance threshold, because the costs that can be imposed on it by a weak actor are relatively low. Strong states alone have the luxury of choosing to fight wars over marginal interests, secure in the knowledge that they can inflict much more damage than they will sustain and that even if they fail to attain their objectives, the war will not threaten their survival.

War Aims and Asymmetric War Outcomes

While other scholars have acknowledged the effects of both military capabilities and resolve on war outcomes, no theory to date can predict the conditions under which strong actors will prevail over more cost-tolerant adversaries and those in which militarily weak but resolute actors are likely to be victorious. I argue that the relative magnitude of the effect of destructive capacity versus cost tolerance varies with the nature of the stronger actor's primary political objective and that the strong

become less likely to prevail against the weak the more that attaining that objective is dependent on target compliance.

I define the term *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 nonstate organization. When a political objective is pursued through the use of military force, I use the terms *war aim* and *political objective* interchangeably. Examples of political objectives typically pursued in military operations include the removal of an incumbent regime (e.g., the U.S. intervention to overthrow the New Jewel regime in Grenada, 1983), maintenance of political authority (French military operations in Chad to defend the government against threats from Libya and GUNT/FAP rebels during the 1980s), defense or acquisition of territory (China's seizure of Hainan Island in 1950), and changes in an adversary's foreign or domestic policy (U.S. attempts to gain Iraqi compliance with UN weapons inspections, 1992-2003). 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 (Blechman and Kaplan 1978). 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, noncommunist South Vietnam.

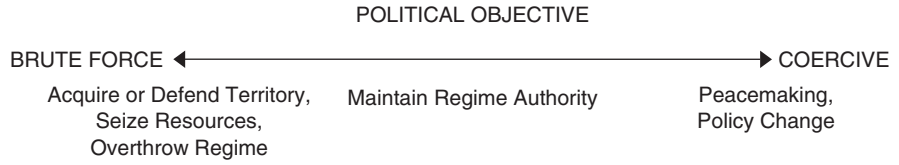
Political objectives can be contrasted with *military objectives*, which I define as the operational goals to be accomplished by the armed forces of a state or opposition movement for the purpose of achieving the desired political outcome. Examples include the attrition of enemy combatants, destruction 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 reclaim 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, such as the attrition of enemy combatants or disruption of enemy command and control, as a means to the desired end.

A Typology of Political Objectives

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

An actor that is strong enough can obtain "brute force" political objectives without 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" (p. 1). Prior to World War II, the Soviets overran Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and part of Finland. Germany absorbed

Figure 1
Typology of Political Objectives



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 with brute force alone. 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 coercive 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 (Schelling 1966).

Most peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations are also primarily coercive 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 coercive and brute force 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 the Relative Effects of Destructive Capacity and Cost Tolerance

The nature of a state's primary political objective has both direct and indirect effects on the probability that it can attain that objective through the use of military force. Political objectives directly affect war outcomes, because there is a much tighter relationship between the military's ability to kill people and destroy things and attainment of brute force war aims. Mack (1975) critiques "the prevalent military belief that if an opponent's military capability to wage war can be destroyed, his 'will' to continue the struggle is irrelevant" (p. 178). But this belief is warranted in campaigns with brute force political objectives. When a state pursues war aims that can be attained with brute force, its material resources and war-fighting capacity relative to that of the adversary are the primary determinants of success and failure.

The more compliance 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. Materially weak but resolute targets can thwart a strong state's ability to achieve coercive objectives simply by refusing to comply no matter how high the cost. The use of overwhelming force can raise the cost of resistance for an adversary, but greater military effectiveness will not necessarily convince that adversary to change its behavior. Cimbala (1994) notes, "Planners frequently approach the problem of targeting as a question of the destruction of so many physical things: bridges, air defenses, depots, and so forth. This is a legitimate concern, but from the perspective of the relationship between force and policy, not the most important issue" (p. 178).

There are, in fact, some situations in which greater destruction is counterproductive to the attainment of a state's political aims. Crushing an enemy's armed forces is not only inefficient but also counterproductive if the desired outcome is a policy change that can be enforced and guaranteed by the existing regime rather than a collapse of the regime. Similarly, military operations that inflict pain and suffering on a civilian population are likely to be counterproductive if the goal is to increase long-term popular support for a political regime. What Jackman (1993) notes of a regime's use of force domestically applies equally well to foreign military intervention: "Force may not induce compliance, and is unlikely to engender

active support" (p. 111). Mack (1975) argues that French military repression directed against the insurgents in Indochina "achieved for the militants what they had been unable to achieve for themselves—namely, the political mobilization of the masses against the French" (pp. 180-1).

It is not that coercive political objectives are inherently more difficult to achieve than brute force objectives. Brute force objectives such as conquest and territorial acquisition generally require enormous resources and cost many lives, while powerful states frequently achieve coercive political objectives (e.g., policy change) without even invoking the use of military force. But an actor with preponderant capabilities can seize brute force objectives in spite of target resistance as long as it is willing to use enough physical force. States can attempt to coerce an adversary into surrendering any type of objective, but states only have the option of pursuing compulsive settlement by force—of physically imposing their will on the adversary—when they have a brute force war aim. No matter how great its military advantage over an adversary, a state that is dependent on target acquiescence to achieve its objectives must use force persuasively, employing its destructive capacity in an effort to gain target compliance by raising the current and anticipated costs of resistance.

The nature of a state's primary political objective also has an indirect effect on intervention outcomes through the selection process that generates the armed conflicts we observe. The militarily strong cannot be physically defeated by weak adversaries. But they can fail to prevail in their wars with weak state and nonstate actors if, during the course of the war, they decide that the cost of victory will exceed the costs they are willing to bear to attain their objectives and choose to withdraw their forces before attaining their war aims. We are more likely to observe intervention failure when strong states have coercive objectives, because states are more likely to *misestimate* the cost of achieving coercive objectives before choosing to use military force.

Because the extent of an adversary's cost tolerance is less directly observable than an adversary's destructive capacity, we can expect prewar estimates of the cost of victory to become less accurate as the effect of resolve increases relative to the effect of military capacity. Uncertainty—and as a result, the risk that a state will select itself into a conflict it cannot sustain to victory—is highest when states pursue political objectives that can only be attained with target compliance. 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 objectives 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 changing target behavior. The amount of coercive leverage an actor can derive from a fixed amount of destructive capacity is contingent on the target's willingness to absorb the costs imposed. The target, therefore, is largely in control of the extent to which achieving a compliance-dependent objective is costly for its opponent and can thwart a strong state's ability to attain a coercive objective simply by refusing to comply regardless of the level of destruction visited on 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. It is difficult to predict costs or plan military strategies with any type of precision when success is dependent on reaching an inherently unknowable enemy breaking point (Mueller 1980).[2]

Primary Hypothesis

Because of the process of mutual selection behind the escalation of conflicts to war, militarily weak actors tend to have higher levels of cost tolerance than their strong adversaries in the asymmetric wars we observe.[3] On average, weak state and nonstate actors suffered 81 percent of a conflict's battle deaths when they chose to fight back against major power militaries in the post-WWII period. And weak states became no more likely to capitulate to their strong adversaries as the ratio of their own losses to those of the major power increased.[4]

But powerful states do not lose small wars simply because they have less resolve than their weak adversaries. A materially weak actor's cost-tolerance advantage is unlikely to blunt the effectiveness of a strong actor's destructive capacity when the strong actor pursues an objective it can obtain with brute force alone. The pursuit of brute force political objectives allows strong states to take full advantage of their vast capabilities to seize their objective and destroy an opponent's capacity, thereby minimizing the impact of target cost tolerance. And even militarily preponderant states are unlikely to underestimate the cost of seizing territory, overthrowing regimes, defending against an invading army, or conquering a neighboring state. But there is much greater uncertainty about the amount of force or the length of time required to persuade a target to change its behavior. When powerful states underestimate the costs of a campaign to attain coercive political objectives, they risk being pushed beyond their cost tolerance threshold and forced to withdraw their forces before they attain their war aims. As a result, the probability that a strong state will prevail over a weak target declines as the need for target compliance increases.

Hypothesis 1 (war aims): The probability that a militarily preponderant state attains its war aims when it uses military force against a materially weak target decreases the more coercive the state's primary political objective.

Alternative Explanations: Regime Type, Strategy, and Commitment

I test my theory about the centrality of war aims in determining asymmetric war outcomes, while accounting for factors suggested by several prominent alternative theories about the determinants of war outcomes. Recent research has focused on three factors in particular: combatant regime type, military strategy, and level of effort or commitment.

Democracy. A substantial body of recent research has advanced the argument that democratic states are more selective about the military contests they initiate because of the domestic political costs of failure (Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992; Reiter and Stam 2002; Rousseau et al. 1996). There is 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; Lake 1992; Reiter and Stam 1998, 2002; Siverson 1995). It is not clear, however, whether the ability to choose more "winnable" wars extends to asymmetric conflicts. In fact, 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).

The theory of asymmetric war outcomes I am testing is agnostic about how regime type would affect a state's likelihood of success should it choose to use military force against a much weaker adversary. I suspect that the uncertainty surrounding the cost of attaining coercive political objectives through the use of force puts both democracies and nondemocracies at risk of selecting themselves into a conflict they cannot sustain to victory. Nevertheless, if democratic governments are more selective about the circumstances under which they will use military force, democratic major powers should be more likely than nondemocratic major powers to prevail when they initiate foreign military interventions. If, on the other hand, democratic governments are particularly sensitive to costs in small wars, they may be more likely to withdraw their military forces after experiencing even low levels of casualties in military operations that do not engage their vital interests.

Strategy. There is little doubt that the manner in which force is employed by a state has a decisive impact on the outcome of many wars (Bennett and Stam 1998; Biddle 2004; Pape 1996; Reiter and Stam 1998, 2002; Stam 1996). I do not, however, anticipate that the military strategies adopted by strong states and their weak targets will

have a large substantive effect on asymmetric war outcomes. Militarily strong states have the physical capacity to employ even the most complicated and demanding military strategies and to change strategies if they find their current strategy is not having the intended effect. States that are materially strong are much more likely than their weak adversaries to have the capacity to implement what Biddle (2004) calls the modern system of force employment. Adoption of modern system doctrine and tactics is likely to have a multiplicative effect on the destructive capacity of strong states, so we may see that strong states attain brute force objectives more quickly or cheaply when they use modern system force employment techniques (e.g., combined arms, fire and maneuver, cover and concealment), or when their adversaries do not.[5] But as I argue above, greater military effectiveness will not necessarily convince a determined adversary to change its behavior. Moreover, the actual force employment strategies of strong states are constrained in particular conflicts by the human, material, and political costs they are willing to pay to attain their objectives. When uncertainty about the manner in which force will need to be applied is low, as it is when states have brute force political objectives, strong states are likely to choose to use military force only when they have sufficient cost-tolerance to employ an effective military strategy. However, when strong states pursue war aims that are dependent on target compliance, they are more likely to discover that they do not have the cost tolerance to use force in the manner in which it would need to be applied to attain their political objectives.

To control for the possibility that the manner in which force is employed has an effect on asymmetric war outcomes beyond what can be accounted for by the nature of the intervening state's primary political objective, I develop two measures of the military strategy employed by the intervening state based on measures employed by Stam (1996) and Biddle (2004).

Commitment. Finally, some argue that constraints imposed on the military's conduct of a war by civilian leaders or failure to commit sufficient resources to the war effort can account for cases in which militarily preponderant states lose small wars (Hess 1986; Summers 1982). 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. Perhaps strong states lose small wars because they fail to use sufficient force to prosecute the war to victory. I test whether states become more likely to attain their objectives as the number of ground troops they commit to combat increases.

Research Design

I test these hypotheses about the determinants of asymmetric war outcomes with original data on all military interventions by the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the

USSR/Russia) against both state and nonstate targets between 1945 and 2001. I define foreign military intervention as the foreign deployment of at least 500 combat-ready,[6] regular military troops (ground, air, or naval) with the intent to participate in hostile action against a target government or substate 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. The dataset contains 127 cases but, because I am testing a theory of asymmetric conflict outcomes, I drop the five cases in which the target is another major power.[7]

Dependent variable. The dependent variable in this study is *intervention outcome*. The variable is dichotomous and takes a value of one when the intervening state attains its primary political objective and that objective is maintained for at least one year after the military intervention is terminated,[8] and zero otherwise. This coding rule was adopted so that only interventions that resulted in a meaningful foreign policy achievement were considered successful. Intervention outcome equals one (attain) in 60 percent of the cases.

Statistical methods. Because the dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of success, I use logit models. The logit model uses maximum likelihood estimation to calculate the probability of intervention success using the following functional form:

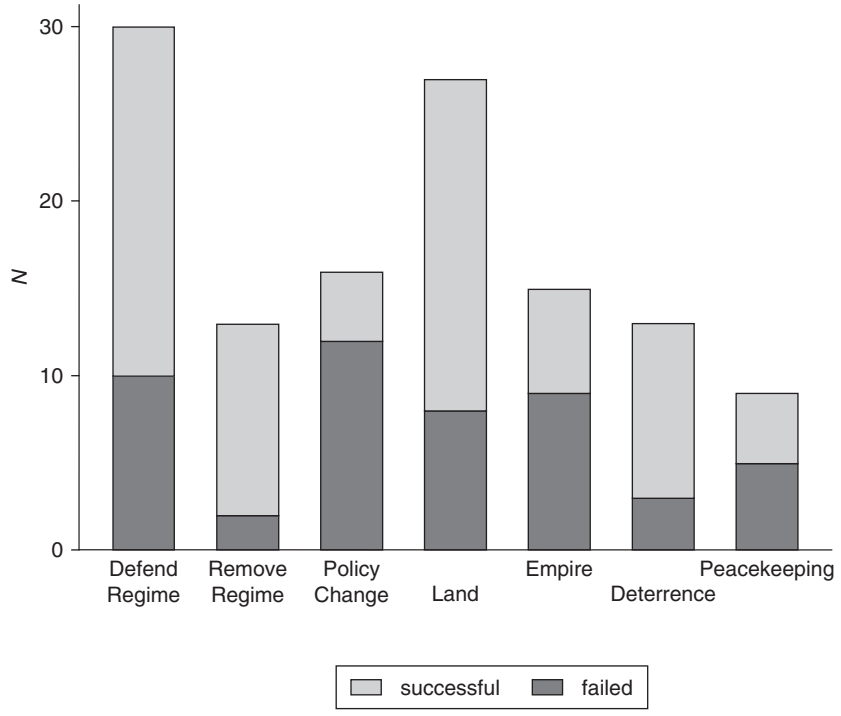
$$\Pr(y_i = 1|x_i) = 1/(1 + \exp(-x_i \beta)),$$

where x_i is a vector of independent variable values for the *i*th observation and β is a vector of parameters (Long 1997).

Explanatory Variables

War aims. The key explanatory variable is the degree to which the intervening state's primary political objective is dependent on target compliance. Similar to the study conducted by Blechman and Kaplan (1978), I focus on the primary political objective of each military intervention rather than policy makers' personal, domestic political, or grand strategic motivations for employing force. To facilitate rigorous coding of the political objective of each military operation, I created political objective categories based on a historical analysis of approximately one quarter of the cases. There are seven political objective types: maintain the political authority of a foreign regime (*Maintain Regime*); maintain empire (*Maintain Empire*); violence suppression and peacekeeping (*Peace*); change an adversary's foreign or domestic policy (*Policy Change*); defend, acquire, or reclaim territory (*Land*); remove a foreign regime (*Regime Change*); and deter aggression (*Deterrence*). I then used a team of four research assistants to research the political objectives of the

Figure 2
Proportion of Successful Interventions by Primary Political Objective Type



major power state in each intervention and to code each case according to the category that best represented the state's primary war aim.[9] Figure 2 illustrates both the frequency of interventions and the proportion of successful interventions by major power primary political objective.

I also create a variable with three categories to capture the nature of the major power state's political objective in each intervention. A state's objective is considered to be brute force if its primary war aim is the acquisition or defense of territory, the removal of a foreign regime, or deterring an adversary from using force to acquire territory or overthrow a regime. Attempting to maintain the political authority of either a foreign government or of one's own colonial government in the face of internal opposition is considered a "moderately coercive" objective. I code the intervening state's primary political objective as "coercive" if the state is seeking a policy change from a foreign government or is engaged in a peacekeeping operation. This measure is included in the models as two dummy variables and one excluded category.

Regime type. I use the Polity IV dataset to obtain a continuous measure of major power regime type by subtracting a regime's autocracy score from its democracy score to produce a twenty-one-point scale that ranges from negative ten to positive ten (Marshall and Jaggers 2002). For military interventions that last more than one year, I use the state's score in the year troops were first deployed. There are too few democratic targets of post-WWII major power interventions to include target regime type as a control variable.

Military strategy. I develop two measures of the military strategy employed by the intervening state. The first measure attempts to replicate Stam's (1996) maneuver-attrition-punishment typology. When a case from my dataset is also in Stam's dataset, I employ his coding. In the remaining cases, I use his description of the strategy types to code my own cases. Following Biddle (2004), the second measure employs country dummies to capture the possibility that the major powers have different force employment doctrines that would impact their military effectiveness.

Troop commitment. I control for the degree of major power resource commitment by including the log of the number of major power ground troops committed to the intervention. This variable equals zero if the intervening state relies exclusively on air strikes, sea power, and/or long-range missiles. Twenty-seven percent of the cases involve fewer than 3,000 ground troops, in 19 percent between 3,000 and 10,000 troops are deployed, and in 21 percent of the cases, troop numbers fall between 10,000 and 30,000. More than 30,000 major power troops are deployed to the conflict location at some time during the intervention in about 33 percent of the cases.

Target type. Since the termination of the United States' unsuccessful intervention in Vietnam, a substantial volume of case study literature has maintained that fighting nonstate actors such as 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). 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 nonstate actors.

Assistance from allies. A notable body of research provides evidence that, while initiators are more likely to win wars, their probability of winning declines precipitously if the target receives help from allies (Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Gartner and Siverson 1996; Wang and Ray 1994). I create a dummy variable that indicates that another state committed troops to aid the intervention target. Less than 20 percent of intervention targets received this type of military assistance. I also include a dichotomous variable (*Coalition*) that indicates whether other major powers committed military troops to assist the primary intervening state. Just over 20 percent of the interventions involved a coalition of two or more major power states. Finally, a weak

target's cost-tolerance advantage is likely to be partially mitigated when strong states intervene on behalf of and in coordination with a local central government. Although the intervening state still has relatively low tolerance for costs under these circumstances, the local government is much less likely to be disadvantaged by a balance of cost tolerance that favors the target. As a result, an intervening state can shift the burden of many of the costs of a war to the local government, lowering its own costs and decreasing the probability that it will exceed its cost-tolerance threshold and withdraw from the conflict without achieving its objectives. A final dummy variable indicates whether the intervening state had a local government ally.

Relative military capabilities. Recent research has refined the concept of power, but measures of relative 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 basic expectation is that the probability a state will prevail over its opponent increases with increases in that state's military capacity relative to that of its opponent. To measure relative military capabilities, I use data from the Correlates of War National Capabilities Index to calculate the ratio of the major power's military-industrial capabilities to the combined capabilities of the two sides (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972; Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996).

Results

Model Specification

Table 1 contains the results of logit estimations of five equations predicting the outcomes of post–World War II major power military operations. Model 1 predicts major power military intervention success employing measures of the major power's primary political objective while controlling for the nature of the target, assistance provided by allies, and relative military capabilities. Both variables indicating the extent to which the intervening state's war aims are dependent on target compliance are statistically significant, and the effects are in the predicted direction. In addition, variables controlling for military assistance provided to the target and local government support for the intervening state are statistically significant. The fit of model is strong, correctly predicting 78 percent of intervention outcomes, an improvement in predictive accuracy of 46 percent over simply choosing the modal outcome category (success). Variables measuring relative military capabilities, whether the target was a state or a nonstate actor, and whether the intervening state fought with major power allies failed to reach statistical significance in any of the models.

I include a measure of the intervening state's regime type in model 2. The coefficient is negative but does not approach statistical significance. Democratic major powers do not appear to be any more or less likely to prevail in asymmetric wars than

Table 1
Logit Analysis of Major Power Military Intervention Success, 1946-2001

	Model 1 War Aims	Model 2 Democracy	Model 3 Strategy	Model 4 Country	Model 5 Commitment
Moderately coercive objective	–1.506*	–1.483*	–1.394*	–1.559*	–1.553*
	(2.49)	(2.40)	(2.20)	(2.42)	(2.48)
Coercive objective	–2.185**	–2.175**	–2.258**	–2.570**	–2.554**
	(3.10)	(3.08)	(3.11)	(3.31)	(3.37)
Nonstate target	–0.180	–0.178	0.159	0.184	–0.213
	(0.32)	(0.32)	(0.26)	(0.30)	(0.37)
Military assistance to target	–2.385**	–2.419**	–2.426**	–2.754**	–2.902**
	(3.35)	(3.26)	(3.33)	(3.31)	(3.66)
Major power coalition	–0.708	–0.669	–0.664	–0.943	–0.649
	(1.28)	(1.12)	(1.18)	(1.48)	(1.16)
Local government ally	2.549**	2.564**	2.707**	2.638**	2.682**
	(4.12)	(4.10)	(4.33)	(3.99)	(4.17)
Relative military capabilities	0.569	0.632	–0.428	0.422	0.494
	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.15)
Major power Polity score		–0.006			
		(0.17)			
Maneuver strategy			1.173		
			(1.61)		
Punishment strategy			0.527		
			(0.93)		
China				–0.291	
				(0.32)	
United Kingdom				–0.033	
				(0.04)	
France				–1.422	
				(1.72)	
Russia/USSR				–0.602	
				(0.71)	
Log of ground troops					–0.115
					(1.90)
Constant	0.648	0.593	0.942	1.348	1.711
	(0.24)	(0.22)	(0.33)	(.43)	(0.52)
Log likelihood	–57.218	–57.204	–55.824	–54.942	–55.295
Observations	120	120	120	120	120
Adjusted count R^2	.46	.46	.52	.58	.46

Note: Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses.
*significant at $p < .05$; **significant at $p < .01$.

nondemocracies. However, it is possible that democratic governments are both more sensitive to the costs of wars with weak adversaries and more selective about the use of military force against these adversaries so that the two attributes effectively cancel each other out.

The military strategy employed by the intervening state is indicated by two dummy variables and an excluded category (attrition). In a model that does not control for the nature of the intervening state's war aims, the effect of employing a maneuver strategy is positive and marginally statistically significant ($p = .08$).[10] However, in model 3, which does control for the state's primary political objective, the probability of intervention success does not appear to be affected by whether the state employs a maneuver, punishment, or attrition strategy. Moreover, controlling for military strategy does not affect the size, direction, or statistical significance of the coefficients on the variables indicating the nature of the state's war aims. The estimation results from model 4 indicate that the probability of military intervention success also does not vary significantly from state to state. Including dummy variables for four of the five major powers slightly improves the fit of the model and the strength of the effect of war aims, but a Wald test confirms that we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the coefficients on all of the state dummy variables are equal to zero ($p = .36$).

Perhaps most surprisingly, model 5 provides no support for arguments that attribute paradoxical war outcomes to a lack of effort or commitment on the part of powerful states. In fact, the coefficient on the troop commitment variable is negative, indicating that major power states may be less likely to attain their political objectives when they commit more ground troops to the war effort. Although the coefficient on the troop commitment variable falls just short of generally accepted standards of statistical significance at $p = .057$, I discuss possible interpretations of this result in the next section.

Substantive Interpretation

The results of this analysis provide strong support for a model of asymmetric conflict outcomes that accounts for the degree of target compliance required to attain the strong state's political objectives rather than on measures of regime type, military strategy, or troop commitment levels. Not only are the coefficients on the war aims variables significant and in the predicted direction, they are robust to a variety of changes in model specification and have large substantive effects on intervention outcomes. Coefficient estimates from all model specifications indicate that states are significantly more likely to achieve brute force war aims such as regime change and the acquisition of territory than coercive objectives such as maintaining the political authority of a foreign regime or convincing an adversary to change an objectionable domestic policy.

In contrast, many of the variables commonly employed to predict war outcomes are not correlated with major power military intervention outcomes. There is no relationship between intervention outcomes and relative military capabilities. Moreover, contrary to expectations, militarily preponderant states are not significantly disadvantaged when they use military force against nonstate actors. Counterinsurgencies and wars of empire have a relatively low probability of success, not because they target nonstate actors, but because their objectives are dependent on target compliance.

Table 2
Logit Analysis Results with Change in the Predicted Probability of Intervention Success

Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	P>|z|	Δ in Variable	Δ in pr(success)
Moderately coercive	–1.525	.602	0.011	0 → 1	–.34
Coercive objective	–2.672	.738	0.000	0 → 1	–.58
Military assistance to target	–2.952	.788	0.000	0 → 1	–.62
Local government ally	2.665	.641	0.000	0 → 1	+.20
Ground troops committed	–0.116	.060	0.054	+/–sd/2	–.09
Nonstate target	–0.268	.556	0.630	n.s.	n.s.
Constant	2.114	.693	0.002		

Note: $N = 122$. Changes in the predicted probability of intervention success are calculated when each of the dichotomous variables is held constant at its median value and each of the continuous variables is held constant at its mean.

Table 2 contains logit regression estimates for the final war aims model of major power military intervention outcomes along with the effect of each statistically significant variable on the probability that the intervening state will achieve its primary political objective. I calculate changes in the predicted probability of intervention success as each dichotomous variable varies from zero to one and the log of troop commitment changes one standard deviation, centered on the mean. All other variables are held constant at either their mean (continuous variables) or median (dichotomous variables) values in the dataset. I briefly describe the effect of each variable on intervention outcomes and then conclude with a broader discussion of the implications of these results for our understanding of asymmetric conflict and of the utility and limitations of military force as an instrument of statecraft.

War aims. The primary political objective sought by the major power state is at least moderately coercive in approximately half of post-WWII major power military interventions. As predicted in hypothesis 1, the probability that a major power attains its war aims when it uses military force against a materially weaker target decreases the more coercive the state's primary political objective. Holding all other variables constant, a militarily strong intervening state is 34 percent less likely to achieve moderately coercive objectives and 58 percent less likely to achieve the most coercive objectives than they are to attain brute force political objectives. When the intervening state has a brute force war aim, the predicted probability of success is over 75 percent. The probability that the intervening state will prevail declines to only 20 percent when the major power has an entirely compliance-dependent political objective.

Assistance from allies. Not surprisingly, foreign military assistance provided to an intervention target significantly reduces the probability of success for intervening

states. When another state commits troops to assist the target of a major power military operation, the likelihood that the major power will achieve its objectives declines by 62 percent. Whereas the major power may have initially determined that the costs of pursuing its objectives vis-à-vis a weak foreign target would be low, when that target begins to receive help from another state, the major power's war costs may increase significantly. This rise in the current or anticipated cost of attaining its war aims may push the intervening state beyond its cost-tolerance threshold and lead to withdrawal short of victory.

While intervening with major power allies does not significantly affect the probability of intervention success, intervening in support of a weak state has a positive effect on the probability of intervention success for major powers. Major power military interventions in support of a local central government are 20 percent more likely to achieve their objectives than military operations undertaken solely on the major power's own behalf.

Level of troop commitment. The coefficient on the log of the number of troops committed is negative and only marginally statistically significant. There is no evidence that a failure to commit sufficient resources to the war effort can account for cases in which militarily preponderant states lose small wars. In fact, the probability of intervention success declines as troop levels increase. It is unlikely that increases in troop strength cause failure, because troop commitment levels are likely to be correlated with unobserved variables that are correlated with an increase in failure rates such as the strength of the adversary's resistance or the magnitude of the intervening state's demands. We cannot conclude that strong states lose because they commit too many troops or that committing more troops to a particular intervention would decrease the probability of success. But the pattern is clearly not consistent with standard arguments that explain paradoxical war outcomes by pointing to a "lack of commitment" on the part of the militarily preponderant state (Hess 1986; Summers 1982).

War Aims, Uncertainty, and War Outcomes in Practice

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 and "a conflict as prolonged as that of Korea and possibly as unwinnable as Vietnam" (Howard 1990; Towle 1991). Retired General William Odom, head of the 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 (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" (p. 214).

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 United States hailed the conflict as a model for the future of warfare. Both President Bush and Colin Powell, then chair 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 United States to attain "full spectrum dominance"—"the capability to prevail, quickly and cheaply, in any and all forms of conflict" (Powell 1995, 157).

What lessons should we draw from Operation Desert Storm? There is no question that technological advances in the stealth and precision of weaponry and in command and control on the battlefield contributed to the low level of U.S. casualties and the speed with which U.S. objectives were attained. But does the "revolution in military affairs" give the United States the ability to win under any conditions? The historical record suggests that a powerful state's ability to achieve its political objectives in war is dependent on more than superior war-fighting capabilities. Advances in military technology may make acquiring and defending territory or overthrowing foreign regimes less costly for militarily preponderant states. But this type of advantage is less valuable in conflicts in which one's primary war aims require target compliance.

Operation Iraqi Freedom is a case in point. U.S. troops attained their first objective—the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime—quickly, and few American lives were lost in combat. Less than three weeks after the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003, central Baghdad fell to U.S. forces. However, after the fall of the regime, the United States' primary political objective shifted from regime removal, a brute force objective, to regime maintenance, a moderately coercive objective, and the target became a growing insurgent movement. Original war plans had called for a rapid troop drawdown 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, U.S.-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). Overwhelming firepower was 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 genuine possibility for U.S. forces, it looks increasingly possible that the United States could withdraw its military force before real stability is achieved in Iraq. In a *CBS News*/*New York Times* poll published April 28, 2004, 44 percent of Americans said that the fighting in Iraq was more difficult than they had personally expected, and 67 percent believed the war was harder than the Bush administration expected.[11] By March 2006, 57 percent of respondents in an *ABC News*/*Washington Post* survey thought that the war in Iraq was not worth the cost.[12] A poll conducted by Cable News Network, *USA Today*, and the Gallup Organization from February 28 through March 1, 2006, found that 64 percent of Americans disapproved of the way that President Bush was handling the situation in Iraq, and 55 percent thought sending U.S. troops to Iraq had been a mistake.[13]

Conclusion

The situation the United States currently finds itself in is hardly unique. Despite their immense war-fighting capacity, major power states have failed to attain their primary political objective in almost 40 percent of their military operations against weak state and nonstate targets since 1945. In every case, the major power chose to terminate its military intervention short of victory despite the fact that it retained an overwhelming physical capacity to sustain military operations. The United States, for example, conducted thirty-four military interventions between 1946 and 2002. In many of these operations, including interventions to remove regimes in Grenada, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, the United States attained a quick, decisive victory. In these cases, prewar estimates of troop requirements and casualties often reflected worst-case scenario thinking, and actual costs were lower than anticipated. However, the United States failed to achieve its primary political objective in ten of its interventions. The U.S. withdrawal from Somalia after the death of sixteen Army Rangers appears to be an extreme case, but it is consistent with a pattern in which the United States experienced higher than expected costs and withdrew its troops short of attaining intervention objectives despite the fact that its military capacity was at most only marginally degraded in the conflict.

Scholars and military leaders have argued that poor strategy choices, domestic political constraints on democratic governments, or failure to commit sufficient

resources to the war effort can explain why strong states lose small wars. But differences between the requirements of wars in pursuit of brute force objectives and military operations with coercive aims suggest a more fundamental limitation on the utility of military force. In the population of all major power military interventions since World War II, the major powers prevail more often than their weak state and nonstate adversaries. But weak actors thwart the objectives of their powerful opponents almost two-thirds of the time when the major powers pursue coercive war aims.

This analysis suggests that the relationship between relative resolve and asymmetric war outcomes is more complicated than previous theories have acknowledged. Arguments that attribute strong state failure to a lack of resolve imply that these states should be less likely to attain their objectives against more resolved targets. 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, and least likely to convince a weak adversary to change its foreign or domestic policies. Moreover, reasonable indicators of the intervening state's resolve, such as the number of troops deployed or the commitment of ground troops to combat, are either not correlated or are negatively correlated with the probability of intervention success.

The approach I take does not deny the impact of war-fighting capacity, force employment strategies, or resolve on conflict outcomes. But my expectations about the effect of these factors on the outcomes of the asymmetric wars we observe are derived from a model in which actors select themselves into wars when they believe they have sufficient strength and tolerance for costs to attain their objectives. 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. Brute force objectives are not easier to attain in the sense of requiring less effort, but an actor's ability to seize brute force objectives is determined more by its military preponderance than its adversary's tolerance for costs. Major power states that decide to use military force to remove an objectionable regime or seize territory usually succeed because they are unlikely to underestimate the human and material cost of doing so. But uncertainty, and as a result, the risk of underestimating the cost of sustaining a military operation to victory, is higher when strong states pursue objectives that can only be attained with a weak target's compliance.

Notes

1. Scholars have explored the question of why some states adopt more effective military doctrines than others, but their explanations tend to focus on culture, level of economic development, domestic institutional structure, or other factors that generally change slowly over time (see, for example, Biddle 2004;

Brooks and Stanley 2007; Kier 1997; Posen 1984; Reiter and Meek 1999). These theories may help explain why two countries have different military doctrines or why a state's military doctrine evolves over time, but they cannot explain why one country would choose to employ a maneuver strategy in one conflict and an attrition strategy in a different conflict within the span of a few years.

2. Theoretically, a strong state always has the option of choosing a brute force political objective (e.g., annihilating its adversary) instead of a coercive objective (compelling the adversary to change its behavior). But this does not imply that states can or should always choose to pursue brute force war aims. A state that has insufficient cost tolerance to sustain a coercive campaign until a coercive objective is attained is unlikely to have sufficient resolve to use the force that would be necessary to achieve a brute force objective. Moreover, pursuing a brute force objective is often counterproductive to furthering the state's security and prosperity interests, since it may increase the risk of inciting other states to intervene on behalf of the target (Werner 2000).

3. I do not employ an econometric technique to correct for the effects of strategic selection because my hypotheses are based on the anticipation of a process of strategic choice. As Danilovic (2001), Schultz (2001), and Sullivan and Gartner (2006) note, logically deducing hypotheses about the outcomes one expects to observe given a strategic selection process effectively endogenizes selection effects. This approach is particularly appropriate when variables (such as *cost tolerance*) are only partially observable (Schultz 2001).

4. Data and results are available at http:/jcr.sagepub.com/full/51/3/496/DC1/.

5. Testing this argument is beyond the scope of this article, but it is consistent with Biddle's explanation of the remarkably low casualty rate and speed of the United States' Operation Desert Storm to expel Iraq from Kuwait.

6. I employ Tillema's (2001) definition of combat readiness; combat-ready forces are "prepared to engage in battle if they encounter resistance" (p. 4).

7. The full dataset is available online at http://tsulli.myweb.uga.edu/.

8. 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 percent of their level at the height of the conflict.

9. The primary political objective of a military intervention can change during the course of an intervention. When the original objective is attained and the major power decides to pursue another objective, the intervention is treated as two operations and the first is coded as a success. In the Korean War, for example, the U.S. military intervention to maintain the South Korean regime is one operation. The push north to the Yalu River to "liberate" North Korea (i.e., to remove and replace the North Korean regime) is considered a second operation. Without such a distinction, whether the United States achieved operational success or failure is ambiguous, and factors contributing to the success of the first operation cannot be distinguished from factors contributing to the failure of the second. When, on the other hand, the major power changes its objective because it decides it cannot attain its original objective, the intervention is retained as one case and the outcome is coded as a failure if it terminates and the original political objective was not attained.

10. Results are available online at http://jcr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/full/51/3/496/DC1/.

11. Survey by *CBS News/New York Times*, April 23-27, 2004. iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, Storrs. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html (accessed on March 10, 2006).

12. Survey by *ABC News/Washington Post*, March 2-5, 2006. iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, Storrs. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html (accessed on March 10, 2006).

13. Survey by Cable News Network/*USA Today*/Gallup Organization, February 28-March 1, 2006. iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, Storrs. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html (accessed on March 10, 2006).

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