

Challenges to the Study of Long Wars

Zachary C. Shirkey, Hunter College, City University of New York

Rationalist, psychological, and domestic politics approaches have all generated internally consistent, plausible explanations for long wars. But sorting out which of these explanations is most valid is quite difficult, because definitional questions bedevil the study of war duration, and more importantly, because it is very hard to evaluate the evidence for competing explanations of war duration. The latter difficulty arises for three reasons. First, many state behaviors are consistent with multiple, competing explanations of long wars. Second, in most states, multiple people play important roles in crafting foreign policies, meaning different leaders may have different primary motives for continuing a war. Last, even individual leaders may be driven by multiple motives. These challenges are relevant for both case study research and large-N studies. Recognizing these challenges should help to improve future studies of the causes of long wars.

Keywords: war duration, research design, multi-causality, domestic politics, psychology, rationality

Why do states continue to wage wars after it is apparent that a victory cannot be obtained quickly and that the fighting will go on for years rather than months? This is an important and difficult question. It is important because long wars are particularly destructive. They produce more fatalities¹ and are a greater threat to regimes' stability than are shorter wars.² The difficulty of studying long

Thank you to Thomas Dolan, Roger Karapin, Dan Reiter, Elizabeth Stanley, Alex Weisiger, and *Polity's* three anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

1. H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 65; Bethany Lacina, "Explaining the Severity of Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50 (2006): 276–89; Zachary C. Shirkey, "When and How Many: The Effects of Third Party Joining on Casualties and Duration in Interstate Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (2012): 321–34, at 331; Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816–1980*. (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1982); Alex Weisiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013), 7–8, 59–60.

2. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Randolph M. Siverson, and Gary Woller, "War and the Fate of Regimes: A Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992): 638–46, at 643.

Published online March 5, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/696290>

Polity, volume 50, number 2 (April 2018), pp. 225–237. 0032-3497/2018/5002-0007\$10.00.

© 2018 Northeastern Political Science Association. All rights reserved.

wars is not that it is challenging to think about reasons why states would continue to fight. Indeed, rationalist, psychological, and domestic politics approaches have all generated logical and plausible explanations for the duration of long wars. Rather, the problem stems in part from the fact that definitional questions and uncertainty about how broadly findings can be applied bedevil the study of war duration. Furthermore, even though many explanations for long wars can be generated, it is very hard to determine which competing explanation is most compelling—both for wars in general and for specific wars. Each of these problems will be explored in turn.

What are Long Wars and How Widely Can Theories of War Duration be Applied?

As with many questions in social science, definitional and applicability problems plague the study of long wars. In the first place, there is no agreed-upon definition of what a long war is. While certainly a war that lasts many years, such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), is a long war and a war that lasts less than a month, such as the Six Days War (1967), is not a long war, the definitional cutoff between these two concepts is unclear. In particular, are wars that last longer than one year, but less than two years, long wars? The answer is not obvious.

This makes it tempting to define long wars using some variable other than time. For instance, perhaps long wars are best thought of as wars in which a chance at peace was missed. Even presuming that it would be possible to determine what should be considered to be a genuine missed opportunity, some explanations of long wars, such as those based on commitment problems, argue that often no such earlier chance at peace would have been available.³ In other words, wars can endure even without leaders missing opportunities for settlement. Thus, we are stuck with using duration to define long wars and must accept a somewhat arbitrary cutoff between long and short wars. For the purposes of this article, wars lasting longer than 18 months will be considered long wars.

More problematic than length alone are questions of what counts as a single war. For instance, is a set of linked conflicts, such as the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), one war or a series of wars? Provided that the halts in the fighting are more than failed cease-fires, it is presumably best to see such conflicts as many wars, especially when the individual conflicts are terminated by formal peace treaties.⁴ Indeed, there

3. James D. Fearon, "Fighting Rather than Bargaining," Unpublished manuscript, 2013, 2–4 (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University); Weisiger, *Logics of War*, 16–32 (see note 1 above).

4. Unfortunately, the decline in formal declarations of war and concomitant decline in formal peace treaties makes such a task more difficult. See Christopher Greenwood, "The Concept

are whole research agendas, such as, but not limited to, the literature on enduring rivalries, that study such linked conflicts.⁵ Thornier still are instances, such as in the First Balkan War (1912–13), where some belligerent states leave the still-raging conflict and then return at a later date. If we approach wars in a dyadic manner, should such temporary exits be seen as war termination? Usually they are not, but a case could be made that they should be seen that way.⁶

In addition, findings on war duration may not be applicable over the whole universe of interstate wars. This is because the nature of war may vary across time periods and also according to states' level of development⁷ and regime type.⁸ These factors should affect the size and ability of the forces employed, the resolve and resiliency of the states engaged, and the issues at stake. For instance, European wars in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries were more likely to become total wars compared to European wars in the mid-eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, which were far more limited in nature. Similarly, the size of military forces deployed in European wars have expanded and contracted over the centuries, in response to shifts in the relationship between the state and the governed and in response to changes in military technology. Explanations of war duration need to be able to address the causal role of these variations in intensity, aims, and scale, or else to state the scope of the applicability of their findings. Reiter's call in this symposium to think about the connections between war initiation and duration should help with this problem, especially in relation to the aims of the belligerent states.⁹

In truth, it is possible to make too much of such semantic problems and questions of scope. Many areas in political science face similar issues. Terrorism, for instance, is notoriously difficult to define,¹⁰ and all social science theories are limited in the scope of their applicability. Yet, as long as researchers are aware of these potential

of War in Modern International Law," *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 36 (1987): 283–306.

5. Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, *War and Peace in International Rivalry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Scott Wolford, "The Problem of Shared Victory: War-Winning Coalitions and Postwar Peace," *Journal of Politics* 79 (2017): 702–16.

6. For instance, see Virginia Page Fortna, *Peace Time: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

7. Douglas Lemke, "War and Development," *International Studies Review* 5 (2003): 55–63, at 57–58.

8. Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller, "War and the Fate of Regimes," 648 (see note 2 above).

9. Dan Reiter, "Unifying the Study of the Causes and Duration of Wars," *Polity* 50 (2018): 168–77.

10. Alex Schmid, "Terrorism: The Definitional Problem," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 36 (2004): 375–419.

problems, address them, and make clear what sort of choices they have made, productive research should be possible.

Competing Explanations for Long Wars

A second problem for the study of war duration is that it is difficult to determine which explanations of long wars are most compelling, for three reasons. First, many state behaviors are consistent with the expectations and mechanisms of multiple, competing explanations of long wars. In other words, evidence that is consistent with a given theory can fail to confirm that explanation because the evidence is often also consistent with rival explanations.

Second, as domestic politics explanations of war dynamics in general correctly argue, multiple people play important roles in crafting states' foreign policies. Though these leaders may all support continuing a war, they may do so for different reasons, implying that multiple explanations could be in play. It also means that it is necessary to determine which members of the leadership group are actually important in deciding to continue the war and which of their arguments persuaded other wavering, but critical, members of that group.

Third, individuals may have multiple motives for supporting continued fighting. They may see little reason to clarify which reasons are most important and instead argue that all of their reasons, when combined, make a compelling case for continued fighting. Further, determining whether their reasons are genuine or are instead rationalizations that are mobilized to buttress the individual's actual reasons may be difficult to untangle—not just for the scholar but perhaps even for the individual.¹¹ This, in turn, can make it difficult for scholars to sort out the relative merits of various explanations of why a war lasted as long as it did beyond saying it was multicausal. Before discussing each of these difficulties in detail, the current state of the war duration literature will be briefly summarized.

Most explanations of long wars fall into one of the following camps: rationalist, domestic politics, and psychological. Rationalist explanations that also adopt the simplifying assumption that states are unitary actors tend to find that private information—which is one of the main rationalist causes of war—should be revealed reasonably quickly by battles and offers for settlement. Thus, wars fought over private information should be short.¹² This has led rationalists to focus on the inability

11. Robert Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology* 27 (2006): 641–63, at 644–45.

12. Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60 (2006): 169–203, at 170–73.

of one or more of the belligerent parties to credibly commit to honoring a peace agreement as the best explanation of long wars,¹³ although other rationalist causes of long wars—such as the introduction of new private information¹⁴—or wars characterized mostly by expected, attritional battles which reveal no private information¹⁵ are possible.

Wars fought due to commitment problems tend to be long because states pursue extreme war aims in order to eliminate the commitment problems. Such aims could include state death, regime change, the destruction of much of the good that is at stake, or a major degradation of the opposing state's power.¹⁶ Such expansive war aims arise because of the nature of commitment problems. Commitment problems occur when what is being fought over would significantly shift the balance of power between the various belligerent states or because one of the belligerent states expects its opponent to become substantially stronger relative to it in the future. Both of these problems mean that the state gaining power would be in a position in the future to demand a more favorable settlement than it could obtain now. This prevents the state from being able to commit in the long term to an agreement that reflects the current distribution of power. Attempts to prevent such expected power shifts require pursuing the sort of expansive war aims discussed above, which in turn lead to long wars.

Domestic politics explanations of long wars usually focus on incentives and constraints faced by individuals and leadership groups. Both individuals and leadership groups may opt to continue wars because they benefit directly from the conflict, even though the war is not benefiting the state or society as a whole.¹⁷ For

13. Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 22–50; Robert Powell, “Persistent Fighting and Shifting Power,” *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (2012): 620–37, at 620–21; Weisiger, *Logics of War*, 16–32 (see note 1 above).

14. Zachary C. Shirkey, “Uncertainty and War Duration,” *International Studies Review* 18 (2016): 244–67, at 250–52.

15. Fearon, “Fighting Rather than Bargaining,” 9–10 (see note 3 above); Catherine Langlois and Jean-Pierre Langlois, “Should Rational States Really Bargain While They Fight?,” unpublished manuscript, Georgetown University and San Francisco University, 2012.

16. Bahar Leventoglu and Branislav L. Slantchev, “The Armed Peace: A Punctuated Equilibrium Theory of War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (2007): 755–71, at 766–67; Powell, “Persistent Fighting and Shifting Power,” 630–32 (see note 13 above); Reiter, *How Wars End*, 21–35 (see note 13 above); Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination and the Korean War* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Weisiger, *Logics of War*, 16–32 (see note 1 above).

17. Sarah Croco, “The Decider’s Dilemma: Leader Culpability, War Outcomes, and Domestic Punishment,” *American Political Science Review* 105 (2011): 457–77, at 460–62; Goemans, *War and Punishment*, 36–51 (see note 1 above); Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Brandon C.

instance, leaders' ability to remain in office and even their physical safety may be tied directly to the successful prosecution of the war. Similarly, leaders may profit financially from the war. The key to such explanations is that the leadership group has to be able to remain in power and continue the war, even though accepting a peace offer would be optimal for the society at large. This in turn requires either hiding setbacks from the broader population—something that should become increasingly difficult over the course of a war—or suppressing popular discontent with the war. Obviously, governments' abilities to do this will vary by regime type, the strength of governments' repressive capacities, the scale of the setbacks faced in the war, and how much cooperation is needed from society as a whole to wage the war. To the extent that governments are able to do this, wars could continue until the private benefits come to an end, there is a change in leadership, or the state's military collapses.

Alternatively, the leadership group could want to end the war, but might depend on support from more hawkish constituencies in order to remain in power. If the leadership group values its political survival more highly than its desire to end the war, the war could continue until a turnover in leadership or military collapse occurred.¹⁸

Psychological approaches argue that although leaders' decisions are generally reasoned and purposeful, they can be influenced or impaired by elements of the human psyche; see, for instance, Stanley's and Dolan's contributions to this symposium.¹⁹ Specifically, psychological approaches argue that factors such as cognitive biases, the impact of emotion on beliefs and decision making, a focus on sunk costs, or concerns about national honor may prevent settlement, thereby extending conflicts.²⁰ These factors may alter how leaders update their beliefs, causing them to resist accepting rational offers for settlement. While these impediments ultimately

Prins, "Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (2004): 937–61, at 939–42; Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see previous note).

18. Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see note 16 above); Michael P. Colaresi, *Scare Tactics: The Politics of International Rivalry* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

19. Elizabeth A. Stanley, "War Duration and the Micro-Dynamics of Decision Making under Stress," *Polity* 50 (2018): 178–200. Thomas M. Dolan, "Moving Beyond Pathology: Why Psychologists Should Care About Short Wars," *Polity* 50 (2018): 201–14.

20. Thomas M. Dolan, "Go Big or Go Home? Positive Emotions and Responses to Wartime Success," *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (2016): 230–42; Thomas M. Dolan, "Demanding the Impossible: Honor, Bargaining, and War," *Security Studies* 24 (2015): 528–62; Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, "Rage of Honor: Entente Indignation and the Lost Chance for Peace in the First World War," *Security Studies* 24 (2015): 662–95; Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see note 16 above).

can be overcome, they imply that wars may continue far longer than rational calculation would suggest.

Despite their different assumptions, these varying explanations of long wars often predict similar behaviors (see Weisiger in this symposium²¹). In particular, most explanations of long wars predict a lack of updating by leaders and a tendency to ignore or discount negative information. For rational, unitary actors, this may be because leaders expect a long, difficult fight with setbacks, but believe such a war is necessary because there are commitment problems that the war offers a fair prospect of overcoming.²² Such rational, unitary actors may also believe they will triumph in an attritional conflict due to a superior ability to bear costs; therefore, long attritional conflicts would not be initially discouraging to them.²³ Likewise, advocates of psychological explanations might expect leaders to dismiss negative events out of a reluctance to admit their errors, a refusal to make tradeoffs, or observational biases.²⁴ Leaders focused on honor rather than tangible gains might also ignore setbacks when deciding whether or not to continue fighting.²⁵ Finally, domestic politics explanations would suggest that leaders may ignore setbacks if acknowledging or acting on them would lead to leadership change or if leaders are likely to gain personally from continued fighting.²⁶ All these explanations of long wars, both rational-choice and psychological, would predict protracted fighting with few, if any, exchanges of offers between sides. These explanations would also predict that even within councils of state there would be little change in expectations or willingness to lower demands in response to negative information from the battlefield. Thus, scholars with competing explanations of long wars might well point to the same evidence as being consistent with their preferred theories.

Even competing explanations arising from within domestic politics approaches can produce similar predictions about what sort of events should be associated with

21. Alex Weisiger, "Rationality and the Limits of Psychology in Explaining Interstate War Duration," *Polity* 50 (2018): 215–24.

22. Reiter, *How Wars End*, 25–34 (see note 13 above); Powell, "Persistent Fighting and Shifting Power" (see note 13 above); Weisiger, *Logics of War*, 16–32 (see note 1 above).

23. Langlois and Langlois, "Should Rational States Really Bargain While They Fight?" (see note 15 above); Shirkey, "Uncertainty and War Duration," 252–54 (see note 14 above).

24. Dolan, "Go Big or Go Home?" (see note 20 above); Dolan, "Demanding the Impossible" (see note 20 above); Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see note 16 above).

25. Dolan, "Demanding the Impossible" (see note 20 above); Lanoszka and Hunzeker, "Rage of Honor" (see note 20 above).

26. Croco, "The Decider's Dilemma" (see note 17 above); Goemans, *War and Punishment*, 36–51 (see note 1 above); Mitchell and Prins, "Rivalry and Diversionsary Uses of Force" (see note 17 above); Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see note 16 above).

war termination. For instance, Stanley and Sawyer argue that wars can become protracted because of three distinct reasons arising from domestic politics.²⁷ First, leaders may have large personal stakes (political, financial, or related to their own security) in a war, which leads them to favor continued fighting. Second, leaders may not know that they should end a war, due to information obstacles that can arise from organizational or psychological sources. Third, leadership groups may be unable to end a war even though they would prefer to do so because certain constituencies, whom they depend upon to remain in power, favor continued fighting. For wars in which any of these three incentives for leaders to prolong the conflict exists, Stanley and Sawyer logically suggest that a change in the ruling coalition is needed to bring about peace and that war termination, therefore, is often associated with such changes in ruling coalitions. Since a leadership change would be consistent with any of the three explanations of how leaders' personal incentives can prolong wars, a hypothetical large-N study that found a correlation between leadership turnover and peace settlements would be unable to adjudicate between these proposed domestic sources of long wars, although it would support domestic explanations of war duration in general.²⁸

These difficulties associated with sorting through evidence are not limited to large-N studies. Although case studies can contextualize data, making it possible to sift through the various causes, they have their own challenges. One obvious issue is that while they may be able to explain the causes of one long war, individual cases in isolation can say little about overall trends. Most clearly, a negative finding in a single case does little to rule out a probabilistic explanation of state behavior.²⁹ Of course, multiple case studies can employ comparative methods and generate reasons to believe both that the causal arguments are correct and that they operate widely.³⁰

27. Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see note 16 above); Elizabeth A. Stanley and John P. Sawyer, "The Equifinality of War Termination: Multiple Paths to Ending War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (2009): 651–76.

28. Also, some leadership turnovers may be caused by the decision to seek peace, rather than being a cause of the decision to end the war. For instance, the decision to appoint Prince Maximilian of Baden as German Chancellor in September 1918 was made after the decision to ask for an armistice had been made, and it was made in order to shift the responsibility for peace onto the German liberals; see David Stevenson, "1918 Revisited," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28 (2005): 107–39.

29. Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *American Political Science Review* 65 (1971): 682–93, at 686.

30. James Rosenau, "Comparative Foreign Policy: Fad, Fantasy or Field?," *International Studies Quarterly* 12 (1968): 296–329.

However, even fine-grained case studies of long wars can run into difficulties that go beyond these issues that all case studies face. Specifically, much as with statistical analyses, individual cases may contain behavior that is consistent with many competing explanations. For example, consider the debate over the causes of continued fighting in World War I after 1916, when the stalemate on the Western Front was obvious to all. Well-supported, competing theories have claimed that the war continued for reasons of domestic politics, honor, commitment problems, or the introduction of new private information.³¹ Since these theories predict that leaders would have made very different sorts of arguments in government deliberations, one would expect case studies to be able to sort out which causes are most important in a given long war. But the ongoing disagreement over why fighting continued for as long as it did in World War I suggests that some other difficulty must be at work.

One reason, which is made apparent by domestic politics approaches to war duration, is that decisions to continue fighting are made by groups of individuals. Since two or more states need to choose war in order for fighting to continue, multiple groups of many individuals are involved. There is no reason to expect various leaders to weight reasons of state, personal gain, or intangibles like honor equally. Indeed, members of a government might not even face the same incentive structures. Some may benefit more from the direct exploitation of natural resources during conflicts, while others may be in more danger of being removed from office or otherwise harmed after the war. Also, individuals may advance an argument not because it is the one they find most compelling, but because they believe that the argument is the one most likely to persuade others. This means that different arguments may be raised at different times, and it may not always be clear which ones matter most. Therefore, while it is possible to observe which factions win debates about war and peace, it is not always possible to determine which motives are most compelling in leading a particular faction to favor the course that it does or which arguments are most important in persuading skeptics to ultimately back the war.

For example, after the initial U.S. victories in northern Mexico during the Mexican-American War (1846–48), members of the Mexican government emphasized very different reasons for continuing the war. President López de Santa Anna reasonably believed he could remain in power only if he delivered military victory. He also believed at first that he could defeat isolated U.S. forces in northern Mexico and later that the rough terrain between Veracruz and Mexico City would allow for a successful

31. Goemans, *War and Punishment*, 36–51 (see note 1 above); Lanoszka and Hunzeker, “Rage of Honor” (see note 20 above); Reiter, *How Wars End*, 21–50 (see note 13 above); Shirkey, “Uncertainty and War Duration,” 250–52 (see note 14 above).

Mexican defense. Others argued that the long American supply line from Veracruz was vulnerable and that attacks on it would force American forces to withdraw. Still others focused more narrowly on the domestic consequences of continuing the war. Gomez Farias, the Mexican vice president, favored continued fighting since it would create an excuse to tax the Catholic Church, while some Liberals hoped that it would lead to a catastrophic Mexican defeat, enabling them to overthrow the entire Mexican system of government. Meanwhile, the U.S. invasion stimulated feelings of nationalism and honor among much of the Mexican populace, meaning that continued resistance was popular.³² Thus, Mexican officials favored continued fighting for a variety of reasons, ranging from beliefs that victory was still possible to domestic political implications.

Thus, it is not enough to find that one or a few important members of a government favored continued fighting for a given reason. Rather, given that different individuals will have favored continued fighting for different reasons, it is necessary to consider how many members of the government thought in which terms, how influential they were in the decision to continue fighting, and if their arguments about why to continue fighting swayed other members of the government.

The other reason that case studies can find significant evidence for competing theories within the same case is that individual leaders may have multiple motives for favoring continuing a war. People are rarely driven by single motives when it comes to their beliefs about political strategies. It is perfectly consistent for an individual to be concerned simultaneously about any combination of commitment problems, honor, personal gains, and the ability to hold a domestic coalition together. It is unlikely that individuals will openly and explicitly rank or weight the various factors that motivate them to continue the war. Furthermore, individuals may not be fully aware of how they would weigh the importance of their own motives. They may engage in rationalizations to avoid acknowledging their real motivations for their actions. They may also half-believe things or make unconscious tradeoffs between various goods while refusing to acknowledge to themselves that they are doing so.³³ This means that leaders' own statements of their motives may not be entirely reliable.

For example, in May 1940, during World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill advanced a variety of reasons for continuing to fight Germany even

32. John S. D. Eisenhower, *So Far From God: The US War with Mexico 1846–1848* (New York: Random House, 1989), 171, 269–74, and 358–68.

33. Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," at 644–45 (see note 11 above); Jonathan Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs," *International Organization* 64 (2010): 1–31.

though France was clearly about to be knocked out of the war. First, Churchill argued that Britain could hold out militarily, provided the United States eventually entered the war. Second, he believed that any likely German peace conditions would be intolerable—both in their immediate implications and because they would leave Britain at Germany's mercy in coming years. Third, Churchill appealed to national honor and prestige, arguing that it was better to go down fighting than to surrender, and that recent defeats in France and Norway had so lowered British prestige that only further dogged resistance could ever raise it again. Finally, he argued that seeking Italian mediation would be futile and that any diplomatic opening would undermine British morale and convince Hitler of Britain's weakness.³⁴

Churchill never explicitly indicated which of these arguments he thought was most important, nor is it especially clear which ones were most important in swaying other members of the cabinet. Indeed, some of his arguments, such as the notion that Britain could get better terms from Germany at a later date, may have been deployed purely in the hope of swaying his fellow cabinet members, rather than being something Churchill actually believed, since he had little or no inclination to ever ask Germany for terms.

Obviously, this problem of leaders being unclear about their actual motives is not limited to war duration research. What makes it particularly worrisome in such research is that, when combined with the challenges discussed above—different individuals motivated by different causes and multiple theories predicting like outcomes—researchers may be tempted to focus on evidence that confirms their preferred explanation even though equally compelling evidence for other explanations may exist.

Taken as a whole, these three difficulties—leaders being unclear about their motives, different individuals having different motives, and multiple theories of war duration predicting like outcomes—create a considerable challenge for determining the causes of long wars. Since it is likely that different individuals will have different motives and that even individuals may have multiple motives, at least some confirming evidence for any reasonable explanation probably will exist. Furthermore, since multiple explanations predict the same behaviors, even if scholars can agree upon which behaviors are important, they may still be unable to agree on which motive was at work. To be clear, these are serious challenges to research on the duration of long wars, but they are not insuperable obstacles. Good research, both in the form

34. John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 106–29, 147–49, and 182–83.

of case studies and statistical analyses, can be and has been done on long wars. Importantly, researchers can adopt several strategies to overcome these challenges.

First, rather than simply suggesting that a cause is possible or that it played some role in extending a war for many years, researchers need to keep these challenges in mind and look for evidence that helps to sort out competing explanations. This requires explicitly discussing alternative explanations and how the evidence fits or does not fit with the various competing explanations. Evidence that rules *out* potential causes will often be more important than evidence that rules *in* potential causes. For example, using large-N methods, Weisiger sorts through three competing explanations about how the revelation of private information relates to war termination: that new and surprising information should lead to war termination; that power shifts due to battles should not bring about war termination; and that all relevant information should be related to termination.³⁵ The key is that the first explanation predicts that recent information and battlefield shifts will lead to war termination,³⁶ the second that only the sum of all relevant information will lead to war termination,³⁷ and the last that both battlefield shifts and the sum of all information will lead to war termination. Thus, by seeing which of these facts are correlated with termination and which are *not* correlated with termination, Weisiger is able to conclude that the combination of recent battlefield shifts and the sum of all relevant information explanation best fits the available evidence across a wide range of wars.³⁸ Similar approaches can be adopted for other potential factors using both case studies and statistical methods.

Second, researchers also need to be open to the likelihood of multicausality and to think in terms of the relative importance of causes, rather than to look for monocausal explanations. While this sounds straightforward enough, it can run against the grain for those who are used to thinking in terms of big debates or competing paradigms. Rather than asking, "Which explanation is correct?" it may be better to ask, "When does each factor apply?" and "How much weight is each factor carrying in explaining a particular outcome?" Both rationalist and domestic politics approaches have taken an important step in this direction in discussing causes of war

35. Alex Weisiger, "Learning from the Battlefield: Information, Domestic Politics, and Interstate War Duration," *International Organization* 70 (2016): 347–75, at 365–71.

36. Shirkey, "Uncertainty and War Termination," 250–52 (see note 14 above).

37. Donald Wittman, "How War Ends: A Rational Model Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 23 (1979): 743–63.

38. Of course, the other explanations could conceivably work better in a small subset of wars, even if the overall trend is consistent with the notion that it is the sum of all available information that best explains war termination.

termination in terms of “equifinality.”³⁹ Multi-causality also has implications for statistical analysis, since it can violate the assumption of unit homogeneity. As Braumoeller puts it, multi-causality “implies a particular form of nonadditivity . . . the presence or absence of one independent variable mitigates—or in the extreme, nullifies—the impact of another.”⁴⁰ This greatly reduces a study’s ability to draw causal inferences and must be dealt with through interaction terms, case selection, and model specification.⁴¹

Therefore, the key to conducting high-quality research on long wars is to acknowledge the inherent challenges posed by the topic and to design studies accordingly. If this is done, it should be possible to rule out some proposed causes and to rule others in. It might also allow for determining the relative weights of various factors in relation to the causes of long wars both overall and for specific wars. Without such careful research design, the field likely will continue to generate interesting and plausible explanations, but will fail to make much headway in determining which explanations are most important in general and for given wars in particular.

Zachary C. Shirkey is Associate Professor of Political Science at Hunter College, City University of New York. His research focuses on military intervention, alignment choices, and war duration. He has published in the *Journal of Peace Research*, *International Studies Review*, *Civil Wars*, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, and the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*. He has also authored three books: *Is This a Private Fight or Can Anybody Join?* (Ashgate, 2009), *Joining the Fray* (Ashgate, 2012), and (with Ivan Savic) *Uncertainty, Threat, and International Security* (Routledge, 2017). He can be reached at zshirkey@hunter.cuny.edu.

39. Stanley and Sawyer, “The Equifinality of War Termination,” (see note 27 above); Weisiger, *Logics of War*, 2–3 (see note 1 above).

40. Bear Braumoeller, “Causal Complexity and the Study of Politics,” *Political Analysis* 11 (2003): 209–33 at 211.

41. Braumoeller, in “Causal Complexity and the Study of Politics,” 211–15, recommends the use of Boolean probit and logit models as they can model various combinations of complexity (see previous note).