Who Dares Wins:  
Confidence and Success in International Conflict

Thèse présentée à la Faculté des sciences économiques et sociales de l’Université de Genève

Par Dominic D. P. Johnson

pour l’obtention du grade de Docteur ès sciences économiques et sociales
mention: science politique

Membres du jury de thèse:
M. Pierre ALLAN, professeur, Université de Genève, directeur de these
M. Philippe BRAILLARD, professeur, Université de Genève, president du jury
M. Alexis KELLER, professeur, Université de Genève
M. Hanspeter KRIESI, professeur, Université de Zürich

Thèse no. 565
Genève, 2004
La Faculté des sciences économiques et sociales, sur préavis du jury, a autorisé l’impression de la présente thèse, sans entendre, par là, émettre aucune opinion sur les propositions qui s’y trouvent énoncées et qui n’engagent que la responsabilité de leur auteur.

Genève, le 8 juillet 2004

Le doyen
Pierre ALLAN

Impression d’après le manuscrit de l’auteur
ABSTRACT

War is a puzzle because, if states were rational, they should agree on their differences in power and reach a solution that avoids the costs of fighting. However, this thesis argues that states are only as rational as the men who lead them, who are well established to suffer from psychological “positive illusions” about their abilities, their control over events, and the future. I examine the effects of positive illusions on four turning points in twentieth-century history: two that erupted into war (World War I and Vietnam); and two that did not (the Munich Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis). In the two crises, I show that positive illusions were held in check, and thus avoided war. In the two wars, by contrast, I show that positive illusions substantially influenced politics, causing leaders to overestimate themselves, underestimate their adversaries, and resort to violence to settle a conflict against unreasonable odds.
## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

| I | Adaptive Over-Confidence | 1 |

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

| II | Positive Illusions and the War Puzzle | 9 |
| III | Looking for Illusions | 47 |

### CASE STUDIES

| IV | World War I – ‘A Brisk and Merry War’ | 65 |
| V | The Munich Crisis – Blind Ambition | 88 |
| VI | The Cuban Missile Crisis – Resolve on the Brink | 108 |
| VII | The Vietnam War – Seeing Red | 124 |

### CONCLUDING CHAPTERS

| VIII | Vanity Dies Hard – Conclusions and Implications | 165 |
| IX | Iraq 2003 – A First Cut | 192 |

### Appendices

| Appendices | 218 |

### Bibliography

| Bibliography | 248 |
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to numerous people who have been instrumental in the development of this thesis. I am particularly grateful to the Kennedy Memorial Trust, who funded my initial period of research at Harvard University, and to Richard Wrangham, who inspired me to start this project. I also thank the Swiss Government, who generously supported my work in Geneva. Special thanks are due for the help and kindness of Pierre Allan, whose ideas and inter-disciplinary vision were crucial to this project’s fruition. He welcomed, encouraged and dramatically improved my work in Switzerland. I also received excellent advice there from Hanspeter Kriesi, Alexis Keller, Elise Lebreque, Nicholas Travaglione, Jean-Marie Kagabo and Chris Boyd. Many thanks are due for the insights and commitment of time from my dissertation committee: Pierre Allan, Hanspeter Kriesi, Alexis Keller, and the president of the jury, Philippe Braillard.


Many thanks are due to the Centre for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, where Dean Wilkening, Michael May, Chris Chyba, Lynn Eden, Scott Sagan, Barbara Platt and many others were so welcoming, encouraging, and patient with me while I finished the thesis.

Many other people in these and other places have significantly contributed to my evolving thoughts and ideas, most among them Dominic Tierney, who has read more of my writing that I would wish to inflict on anyone. I am also extremely grateful to the many others who have given insightful criticism on the thesis or its ideas, including Mike Wilson, Brian Hare, Jack Hirschleifer, Richard Betts, John Garofano, Scott Gartner, Roger Johnson, Jenny Johnson, Gabriella de la Rosa, Gordon Martel, Rose McDermott, Daniel Nettle, Azeem Sutterwalla, Shelley Taylor, Stephen Walker, Luis Zaballa and many of the people already mentioned above.

Finally, I thank the encouragement and inspiration of a remarkable collection of people whose company was invaluable while writing this thesis: Dennis and Kiyomi Briscoe, Nick Brown, Gavin King, Duncan and Elizabeth McCombie, Mark Molesky, Juliette Talbot, Dominic Tierney and, especially, Gabriella de la Rosa.
In what branch of human activity should boldness have a right of citizenship if not in war?

Carl von Clausewitz
Chapter I

Adaptive Over-Confidence

O God of battles! Steel my soldier’s hearts;
Possess them not with fear: take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if th’opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them!

Henry V ¹

This thesis proposes a new theory for why we so easily end up at war. The last century was aptly named our bloodiest century. This one has not started much better. In contrast to traditional approaches that focus on how leaders rationally calculate the odds and spoils of war, I argue that systematic over-confidence is a widespread human trait that was adaptive in our evolutionary past and continues to propel us into the wars of today.

In November 2003, the New York Times posed the 25 ‘most provocative questions facing science.’ Number 2 on the list was ‘Is war our biological destiny?’ Amidst the mayhem in post-war Iraq, this question came ahead of such enigmas as ‘How does the brain work?’ at number 4, and ‘How did life begin’ at number 19.² In my opinion, war is in no way our ‘biological destiny’ – the notion that we are somehow condemned to it is ludicrous. However, that this question is posed attests to our continuing curiosity and ignorance about war. While hardly our inevitable destiny, conflict is very much our evolutionary past as well as our present and we ignore the growing biological insights at our own peril.

Before starting, I want to lay out exactly what I will and will not do. First, I do not suggest that over-confidence is the single cause of war. There are numerous reasons and incentives for war, which undoubtedly contribute to some or all of them. Second, I do not suggest

¹ William Shakespeare, Henry V, Act IV, scene I.
that over-confidence is the ultimate cause of war. Rather, other underlying causes such as concerns for security and power lay the kindling for war, while over-confidence is a proximate cause that helps to spark them. Third, I do not suggest that over-confidence among individual people miraculously explains the complex phenomenon of war among nations. Rather, the ripple effects of over-confidence through a nation’s leaders, decision-making groups, organisations, armed services and wider society increase the probability of escalation and war. Fourth, I do not suggest that over-confidence is a fixed trait that inflates the chance of war equally at all times (this would fail to explain variation in war and peace). On the contrary, I show that both the sources and consequences of over-confidence are sensitive to context: At times circumstances conspire to let them run rampant and encourage war, while at other times they are suppressed and foster peace.

The central puzzle is what Lawrence LeShan called ‘the enthusiasm with which we greet the onset of war.’ Not all of us are enthusiastic about war of course, but some always have been throughout history, and it only takes a few key enthusiasts to start one. Human nature is an ingredient of war that we can no longer afford to ignore:

‘It is easy enough when examining the history of each war to find the exact series of circumstances that led to it: the angers, the fears, the complaints, the clashing interests, the broken treaties. However, as Thucydides warned us long ago, we must look beyond the specific events if we are to understand the real causes of even one war … We must not ask, “What events led to the outbreak of this war or that one?”, but rather, “What is there in man that makes him so ready to go to war, in almost all cultures or economic conditions?” The question we are dealing with here concerns the readiness, the receptivity, the seed-bed on which specific events fall and which, when nourished by it, flower into armed intergroup conflict.’

Although we may like to think that the world is gradually becoming more peaceful, the most recent analysis of the ‘Correlates of War’ database at the University of Michigan reveals that, since detailed records begin in 1816, there has been a ‘disquieting constancy in warfare.’ There have been over 2 million battle deaths in nearly every decade since World War II, and the 1990s was ‘one of the worst decades in modern history’ with 31 new outbreaks of war – and the data weren’t all in by the time of the study. As the authors noted, war ‘may not be going away as fast as we would wish or might have thought.’ We should, therefore, be exploring any promising avenues that might help to break the trend. A recognition of something so simple, so often noted and yet so sinister as over-confidence should help us design, run and scrutinise our institutions and decision-making processes to stamp it out. We haven’t succeeded yet.

---

6 Ibid., p. 65.
ADAPTIVE OVER-CONFIDENCE

In this thesis I will argue that systematic over-confidence is a widespread human trait that was adaptive in our evolutionary past and continues to drag us into the wars of today. But how can over-confidence be adaptive? Counterintuitive though it may seem, exaggerated confidence can bring numerous advantages. First, over-confidence can pay off in the long run because the costs of failure arising from over-confidence often matter less than the missed opportunities arising from accuracy or over-cautiousness (see Appendix 1.1 for details of this phenomenon). Second, over-confidence has been shown in numerous contexts to facilitate more effective mental, social and physical functioning. Third, and most importantly for this dissertation, over-confidence can increase performance in conflict – even against a much stronger opponent – because it boosts resolve and/or bluffs the enemy into submission. These three research areas suggest that over-confidence can provide significant advantages in taking on, tackling, and winning fights, and will be advantageous in the long-term if it succeeds frequently enough. Since an opponent can exploit the same tactic, however, there will be a competitive escalation (or ‘arms race’) among adversaries to outdo each other. All other things being equal, in such an arms race high confidence players will beat low confidence players. Hence the motto of Britain’s elite Special Forces, the SAS: ‘Who dares wins.’

However, too much over-confidence can lead to disaster, because an overly confident actor may have their bluff called. Not only might they lose, but they may also suffer elevated costs of failure having committed extra resources to stage the bluff. Clearly then, there is some balance, in which a degree of over-confidence is ‘strategic,’ but too much is bad. Every now and then it will be pushed too far, and a limit will be found. Some key events in history corroborate this view. For the western Allies, ‘the lesson of World War I is said to be: avoid provoking an aggressor with excessive strength; that of World War II: avoid encouraging an aggressor with

---

7 A note on definitions. I follow the American Heritage Dictionary definition of confidence and over-confidence: Over-confidence is ‘excessively confident; presumptuous’ (a definition consistent with the key psychological phenomenon of the thesis, ‘positive illusions,’ since they represent assessments that exceed what is objectively possible). Over-confidence contrasts with plain confidence, which is ‘trust or faith in a person or thing, or ‘a feeling of assurance, especially of self-assurance’ or ‘the state or quality of being certain: I have every confidence in your ability to succeed.’ Confidence can therefore represent realistic assessments. Heritage (2000) The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Fourth Edition Houghton Mifflin Company. The term adaptive can mean adaptive in the evolutionary biological sense (i.e. a trait that provides a survival or reproductive advantage and therefore spreads by natural selection), or adaptive in the common usage sense (i.e. a trait that improves effective functioning, whether deliberately or accidentally). These two definitions are not mutually exclusive and may often converge, but the theory of the thesis primarily focuses on the evolutionary biological sense – adaptive via natural selection.


excessive weakness.' While a fine balance must be struck, a certain amount of bluffing is critical to success in a world where everyone else is bluffing too.

Because of its advantages, people often consciously feign greater confidence than warranted (i.e. propaganda for strategic ends). However, this thesis focuses on a different source of over-confidence that is widespread, sub-conscious and potentially deadly: ‘Positive illusions.’

What are Positive Illusions?

Psychologists have discovered that most of us, as humans, are systematically biased towards exaggerated confidence. We tend to hold ‘positive illusions’ in three main domains: We over-estimate our own qualities and capabilities, exaggerate our ability to control events, and have over-optimistic expectations of the future. The phrase ‘positive illusions’ reflects the paradox that most people systematically view these attributes as better than they objectively can be in reality.12

Recent theoretical work by evolutionary biologists suggests that human brains evolved these tendencies because they were adaptive in our evolutionary past. Of particular importance for this thesis, positive illusions may have been favoured by natural selection during human evolution because, wherever there was conflict, there was an eventual reproductive advantage for individuals with exaggerated resolve and who commanded a greater ability to bluff their opponents.13 A sub-conscious bias for over-confidence is more effective than merely acting over-confidently at a conscious level, because in the latter, a bluff is more likely to be accidentally betrayed to opponents via ‘behavioural leakage’ (such as hesitant or nervous behaviour). An actor’s signals are therefore less credible to others. Positive illusions in conflict situations may have been under significant selective pressure in our evolution because combat and warfare have been a frequent feature of virtually all human cultures since the earliest archaeological records, and most likely long before (it is therefore perhaps not surprising that men – nearly always the warriors – are subject to greater positive illusions than women).14 As a result of these processes, we are predisposed to a baseline bias towards over-confidence.

Positive Illusions and War

There are many underlying reasons for war, but be it for power, territory, resources, ideology, or humanitarian aid, positive illusions may systematically increase our willingness to fight them. As I will show in later chapters, the outbreak of war is commonly fuelled by over-confident

---

assessments of rapid victory, meaning that we often end up in wars that we did not expect would be so hard to win. Although the advantages of positive illusions can sometimes echo their adaptive legacy and bring glory (as Henry V hoped in his plea to the ‘God of battles’ – see opening quote), in modern warfare, with modern weapons, they can wreak havoc.

The confidence of soldiers, commanders, statesmen and nations has been a long- appreciated ingredient of success. Napoleon believed that, in war, morale is three times more valuable than physical strength, and Carl von Clausewitz wrote in his seminal work, ‘war is the province of danger, and therefore courage above all things is the first quality of a warrior.’ One hundred and fifty years later, writing on the Vietnam War, Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts suggest that high morale remains a key attribute: ‘Optimism is psychologically necessary for dedicated and energetic performance; analytical defeatism becomes operationally counterproductive.’ Indeed, differences in morale can turn the tide of wars. At one end of the spectrum, low wartime morale can lead to military coups or domestic revolutions that bring down the home government (e.g. Milosevic in Serbia); at the other, high wartime morale can allow nations to carrying on fighting apparently hopeless battles for years without surrender (e.g. the resistance against the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan). Even if seemingly irrational in taking on a stronger opponent, weaker sides sometimes win – even against superpowers – and this is often attributed to the higher resolve of the underdog. In extreme cases, very high resolve of a weaker power can render even massive military coercion by the stronger side not only difficult, but effectively useless. In the Vietnam War the U.S. failed to break North Vietnamese resolve despite years of relentless carnage and more tonnage of bombs dropped than during the whole of World War II. As Ho Chi Minh promised, ‘kill ten of our men and we will kill one of yours. In the end, it is you who will tire.’ The U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson suggested that there had been an ‘unexamined assumption that a display of American power would cause the enemy to run.’ The fact that it was ‘unexamined’ suggests that assessments of wartime supremacy do not always arise consciously, they arise from deeper beliefs that are often taken for granted.

Despite the apparent importance of resolve, international relations scholarship tends to focus on the balance of material power and resources among the world’s nations, when many of the more immediate threats to international security are characterised by much weaker states that

---

15 If one has positive illusions about a war and then wins it, then an initial expectation of victory would not seem to have constituted a ‘positive illusion’ after all. However, the argument of this thesis is about causes, not effects. As a standard part of human psychology, the phenomenon of positive illusions is argued to increase the probability of war, regardless of the outcome. Positive illusions represent a strategy, not a predictive theory of who wins wars.
Over-confidence is adaptive, and as a result has become an integral aspect of our psychology. Second, I present evidence that, whether or not it has an evolutionary origin, over-confidence is nevertheless an empirically established phenomenon of psychology that we cannot ignore in understanding conflict. Third, I demonstrate that over-confidence contributes to causing war. Each of these three claims are independently valid, but the thesis’s task is to show that they are linked: I argue that the strategic advantage of a confident and offensive spirit was favoured by natural selection in human evolution, hence is evident in our psychology today, and promotes war (see Figure 1.1). My aim is to bridge the two gaps between the empirical phenomenon of over-confidence in war, its widespread occurrence in normal people, and its roots in our evolutionary history. Finally, I will argue that the impact of over-confidence on international politics may be especially high because, while there is considerable variation in positive illusions among the population at large, there are several reasons to expect that political and military leaders come from the high end of this distribution (due to self-selection of those people who want to become leaders; by institutional selection of those who do become leaders; and/or by the non-random selection of henchmen by those who are leaders).

Figure 1.1. The thesis's argument of three linked phenomena: Over-confidence was adaptive in our evolution, is evident in our psychology today, and promotes war.

Alternative Origins of Over-confidence

Before launching into the thesis’s main argument, I want to step back and acknowledge that while I focus on positive illusions, there are other possible sources of over-confidence. Over-confidence may originate from: feigning exaggerated confidence deliberately; becoming cocky
Adaptive Over-confidence

after a string of successes; believing that God offers superior powers and protection; certain (normal) personality types; certain (abnormal) personality disorders; other cognitive and motivational biases; and neurochemical stimuli – such as hormones (see Appendix 1.2 for a comparison of these sources of over-confidence, and for examples).

However, positive illusions may serve as a root cause of (or ‘meta-theory’) for these other forms of over-confidence. The three established forms of positive illusions – over-estimating qualities and capabilities, exaggerating the ability to control events, and over-optimistic expectations of the future – are very basic illusions that may spawn many other kinds of traits. If positive illusions were adaptive in our past, then we might have evolved a host of psychological biases, skills, beliefs and inclinations that allow us to tap the advantages of optimism. For example, the cognitive guile to deceive, the denial of unpleasant information in the face of danger, or the quickness to learn confidence from past successes, may each have evolved because of the adaptive advantages of maintaining positive illusions. This applies to many of the potential sources of over-confidence. All of them ultimately promote our self-esteem, perceptions of control or optimism about tomorrow.

Other lines of thinking support such a meta-theory approach. In a recent review of optimism in psychology, Christopher Peterson noted that ‘relatively little attention has been paid to why optimism has such a wide array of correlates.’ He argued that optimism represents ‘a Velcro construct, to which everything sticks for reasons that are not always obvious.’ Even in the apparent dichotomy between ‘cold’ cognitive biases (imposed by brain architecture) and ‘hot’ motivational biases (imposed by emotional needs), both may in fact represent different but complementary adaptive mechanisms to overcome ancient evolutionary challenges. As Peterson notes, ‘optimism is not just a cognitive characteristic: It has inherent emotional and motivational components.’ The impact of ‘positive psychology,’ originally stemming from the work of Martin Seligman, on the behavioural sciences in recent years cannot be overstated. Reams of journal articles now document the evidence and utility of optimistic biases in pretty much any context one can imagine. Lionel Tiger’s book Optimism: The Biology of Hope argues that optimism is one of the most fundamental traits of human evolution. Positive illusions, and the attendant over-confidence and optimism that they engender, appear to be a deeply rooted and widespread human characteristic that evolved because they enhanced our performance in social relations, illness, hardship, competition, danger and – perhaps – man’s most taxing endeavour: War.

23 Ibid., p. 49.
PLAN OF THE THESIS

In Chapter 2 (Positive Illusions and the War Puzzle), I present the positive illusions theory, discuss why it should have a significant impact on the causes of war, examine whether it is still adaptive today, and cite some illustrative historical examples. In Chapter 3 (Looking for Illusions), I describe how variation in positive illusions can explain when wars occur and when they do not, and detail the predictions of the theory.

The subsequent chapters form four historical case studies, which I have arranged in chronological order. Chapter 4 (‘A Brisk and Merry War’) examines the extraordinary confidence with which all sides greeted the outbreak of World War I. I then examine two crises. In Chapter 5 (Blind Ambitions), I examine why war did not break out during the Munich Crisis of 1938, as a test the reverse prediction of the positive illusions theory that this was partly the result of an absence of over-confidence. I also test whether positive illusions increased again to promote war in 1939. Chapter 6 (Resolve on the Brink) is the second crisis case study, in which I examine whether the avoidance of what could have become a nuclear war in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was related to an absence of over-confidence. In what is likely to be a controversial chapter, Chapter 7 (Seeing Red) investigates whether the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was partly spurred on by an illusive belief in victory.

I have deliberately plunged into this minefield because, as with all the case studies, if my theory cannot help to understand the major conflicts of our time, then it cannot serve as such an important theory. All the wars and crises in this thesis are deliberately meant to provide tough test cases: They represent four key turning points in the history of international politics, in which positive illusions should have been irrelevant because of overriding political and international pressures, and for which well-established alternative explanations already exist. My task is to show that, nevertheless, positive illusions offer new insights for understanding them.

The conclusion in Chapter 8 (Vanity Dies Hard) argues that, while the causes of war are numerous, the frequent association of over-confidence and the outbreak of war is not coincidental. When people come into conflict with others, it seems that they tend to be over-confident that they will prevail. This bias has a strong theoretical and empirical foundation, and important implications for international relations theory and for policy makers. Our evolutionary and psychological legacy of positive illusions offers a novel explanation for the puzzle that states often go to war, at the expense of much blood and treasure, even if the odds are uncertain or against them.

Chapter 9 (Iraq 2003: A First Cut) investigates whether we should still worry about over-confidence in the new millennium. An analysis of the most recent war – the U.S. led invasion of Iraq – suggests that we certainly should. Though the invasion itself was a rapid and outright military victory, U.S. decision-making still shows telltale signs of positive illusions, both in Iraq and in its wider foreign policy.
Chapter II

Positive Illusions and the War Puzzle

The mistaken belief that one is militarily superior to a rival may generate risky policies that can lead to costly wars that no one wanted.

Philip Tetlock ¹

Always remember, however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance.

Winston Churchill ²

International conflict is often characterised by two opponents sharing the belief they will win. Usually, of course, one of them is wrong. This problem has been labelled the ‘War Puzzle’ – states led by rational decision-makers should not fight because both sides can avoid the costs of war by negotiating a pre-war bargain reflecting their relative power (and thereby preventing war itself).³ Since wars do occur, it appears that states do not concur on relative power. In short, wars often seem to occur because states are over-confident that they can win.

I propose that such misperceptions may be explained by actors holding ‘positive illusions’ of their capabilities, a cognitive phenomenon of over-confidence well documented in empirical psychology and common among normal people. Positive illusions also have compelling theoretical foundations in evolutionary biology and the strategy of conflict. Positive illusions can be advantageous in conflict because inflated assessments of the probability of winning (through over-estimation of one’s own ability and/or under-estimation of the enemy) can increase the actual

Positive Illusions and the War Puzzle

probability of winning, either by increasing one’s own resolve or by bluffing the opponent. This competitive advantage may have led to the selection of positive illusions over the history of human evolution.

Yet, whatever the origin, the consequence of the phenomenon today is that humans are prone to over-confidence about their abilities, their control over events, and the future. To the extent that these filter through into politics, states will be prone to overestimating the likelihood of victory. This increases the probability of a resort to violent means to settle a conflict even if the odds of winning are low.

Positive illusions therefore have two consequences in today’s world: First, their strategic advantages in competition may sometimes serve to increase military effectiveness, as they are supposed to have done in the past (though this is not the focus of the thesis). Second, whether or not that first consequence is true, positive illusions are likely to increase the probability of war (this is the focus of the thesis – explaining war). These two consequences are not-mutually exclusive. If positive illusions are at work, they may help us fight better even if they also lead us to war more often.

In this chapter, I outline the historical link between over-confidence and war, describe the evidence for positive illusions in modern humans, present the theory for why they were adaptive in our evolutionary history, and finish with some illustrative examples of positive illusions in recent wars.

* * *

On 16 November 1532, the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizzaro and his modest force of 168 men attacked and defeated an Inca army of 80,000 soldiers at Cajamarca in Peru. Despite the incredible asymmetry in manpower, the Spaniards apparently won due to superior weaponry and the effects of surprise at the novelty of canon, horses and trumpets. But the more bizarre mystery is what led the conquistadors to believe in the first place that it would be possible to win in the face of such enormous adversity. There are accounts of the whole valley being full of Inca soldiers, filing out of their huge encampment for most of the morning. What gave the Spaniards the audacity to stay and fight? A Spanish eyewitness wrote that having arrived, they could not turn back, or show fear, as it would have exposed a belief that they might not win. Pizzaro had complemented his force’s morale by telling them that there were ‘only’ 40,000 Inca soldiers anyway. It seems as though they were determined to maintain the illusion that they expected to win.

Pizzaro was apparently served well by his confidence. Often, however, such confident evaluations bring disaster instead. There is a vast literature on the all too many ill-fated decisions to attack, with insufficient forces, what were clearly formidable opponents (this has been called ‘military incompetence’). Of course, there are many reasons why even knowingly weaker sides

---

4 Pizzaro, P. (1921) Relation of the Discovery and Conquest of the Kingdoms of Peru The Cortes Society, New York; Markham, C.R. (1872) Reports of the Discovery of Peru Printed for The Hakluyt Society, London; Diamond, J. (1998) Guns, Germs and Steel Vintage, London, see chapter 3, ‘Collision at Cajamarca.’ The Spaniards had only a single canon, and only 12 guns (even these were early harquebuses, which were difficult to load and fire).

will choose to get embroiled in combat, such as being cornered, defending against attack, fighting to gain concessions, being a sacrificial pawn in an overarching strategy and so on (one can of course imagine many others). As Jervis noted, ‘a country could rationally go to war even though it was certain it would lose.’ Nevertheless, as other authors have noted, ‘the most superficial acquaintance with the past quickly yields a rich crop of professional incompetents who led or ordered their followers into the jaws of disaster in pursuit of what hindsight shows to have been an unlikely success.’ It is the origin of such over-confidence that is the subject of this thesis.

The psychologist Norman Dixon argued that military incompetence was a result of the way in which military institutions select for and reinforce certain strong-minded characteristics in their leaders. But as Barbara Tuchman has made clear, over-assessment of one’s relative capabilities is not limited to the military. There are numerous examples of over-confidence bringing catastrophe in a diversity of professional contexts, from business, to trade unions, to government. Examples also abound throughout the world’s cultures, over all of recorded human history, and from the battlefield decisions of military commanders to political group decision-making with the benefit of excellent intelligence. It does not, therefore, appear to be an artefact of particular modern or even military institutions. Rather, it is an apparently widespread phenomenon found in all human endeavours.

Perhaps, then, it is something more fundamental about human behaviour. Was Pizzaro’s confidence similar to that of Israeli Chief of Staff David Elazar, four centuries later, saying of the Syrian forces before the 1973 Yom Kippur war, ‘we’ll have one hundred tanks against their eight hundred ... That ought to be enough’; or General Custer’s cry at the battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876, ‘Hurrah, boys, we’ve got them!’ after which his entire force of 675 men was annihilated by what he had been reliably informed would be 3,000 Indians (Custer had reported this figure to his officers as only 1,500!); or the American Civil War officer, John Sedgwick, who declared ‘They couldn’t hit an elephant at this distance,’ immediately prior to being killed by enemy fire at the battle of Spotsylvania in May 1864.

Are such stories isolated cases of arrogance? Or is over-confidence a common enough feature of history that it may be an important factor in understanding the systematic tendency of human societies to accept the great risks of war? Various authors, echoing the opening quote from Churchill, suggest that the latter is true. In his influential book The Causes of War, historian

---

Geoffrey Blainey argued that ‘recurring optimism is a vital prelude to war. Anything which increases that optimism is a cause of war. Anything which dampens that optimism is a cause of peace.’\textsuperscript{13} Robert Jervis wrote that ‘excessive military optimism is frequently associated with the outbreak of war,’\textsuperscript{14} and Alfred Vagts concluded that ‘with only a few exceptions, the wars of the century from 1815 to 1914 were undertaken with each side believing that it would win the war.’\textsuperscript{15} Norman Dixon found an ‘unrealistic over-confidence in rapid victory’ to be a ‘notable feature of the Boer War, of the First World War, of the Second World War and even, through what was by now a quite extraordinary incapacity to profit from experience, of the Suez crisis and Bay of Pigs fiasco.’\textsuperscript{16} Sumit Ganguly also deduced over-optimism to be a root cause of the India-Pakistan wars – a significant finding given that most theories of war have a Eurocentric bias.\textsuperscript{17} There is also accumulating evidence of unrealistic expectations in Vietnam, Russia’s campaign in Afghanistan, Iraq’s attack on Iran, the Falklands, Somalia, Kosovo and, according to a number of authors, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.\textsuperscript{18} A RAND study found that even limited wars ‘often cost more and last longer than anticipated.’\textsuperscript{19} Richard Ned Lebow’s study of brinkmanship crises found that in all of the ones that led to war, leaders ‘grossly misjudged the military balance between themselves and their adversaries. In every instance they were confident of victory.’\textsuperscript{20} John Stoessinger discovered ‘a remarkable consistency in the self-images of most national leaders on the brink of war. Each confidently expects victory after a brief and triumphant campaign. This recurring optimism is not to be dismissed lightly by the historian as an ironic example of human folly. It assumes a powerful momentum of its own and thus becomes one of the causes of war.’\textsuperscript{21} Stephen Van Evera wrote that ‘at least some false optimism about relative power preceded every major war since 1740, as well as many lesser and ancient wars.’\textsuperscript{22} The logic has been extended even to the complexities of nuclear war: ‘The probability that a war will start is increased if two groups each believe that they can win the war. This is true regardless of weapons and their magnitude.’\textsuperscript{23} Despite the pervasiveness of the idea that humans generally make rational decisions, the reality is that often, ‘the fog of hope and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\end{thebibliography}
wishful thinking obscures the facts. Nations miscalculate and go to war believing that national goals will surely be attained."^24

To sum up, it seems that when humans are faced with important decisions in many walks of life, ‘we compensate for our inability to foretell ... by asserting positively just what the consequences will be."^25 When two nations are at the brink of war, history tells us that their respective estimates of winning often sum to greater than 100% (e.g., both think they have more than a 50% chance of winning), which betrays unwarranted over-confidence on one or both sides.^26 From where does this illusive bias towards optimism come?

**POSITIVE ILLUSIONS: OUR HERITAGE OF OVER-CONFIDENCE**

It turns out that a tendency towards over-confidence is a well-established psychological phenomenon among normal people, and has been replicated experimentally thousands of times in a wide variety of contexts.\(^{27}\) The prevalence of human optimism also has a significant precedent in the work of Sigmund Freud, as well as in many of the world’s ideologies, national constitutions and religions. The anthropologist Lionel Tiger claimed that optimism is one of humankind’s most defining and adaptive features.\(^{28}\) Since the 1960s, carefully controlled psychological experiments began to demonstrate that language, memory and thought are systematically biased in a positive direction. For example, people utilise more positive than negative words, selectively recall positive memories more readily than negative ones, evaluate themselves more positively than other people, attribute success to themselves but failures to others, and are over-optimistic about the future.\(^{29}\) In a recent review of the wide prevalence of optimistic biases, psychologist Christopher Peterson noted that ‘apparently, in our minds, we are all children of [Garrison Keillor’s imaginary] Lake Wobegon, all of whom are above average.’\(^{30}\) Accumulating evidence demonstrates that most people exhibit over-confidence in three key domains: ‘(a) They view themselves in unrealistically positive terms; (b) they believe they have greater control over environmental events than is actually the case; and (c) they hold views of the future that are more rosy than base-rate data can justify.’\(^{31}\) Studies

---


These authors have thrice restated the robustness of their position after reviewing the evidence that has been published.
typically report that 67% – 96% of people rate their own qualities as better than their peers and, since it is ‘logically impossible for most people to be better than others,’ this tendency has been labelled ‘positive illusions.’ Note that even though some people may be correctly assessing themselves as superior to most others, a majority doing so cannot represent reality. In any case, not all experiments simply compare reported values to the average: Positive illusions are also evident when third parties assess the subjects, and when expectations are compared with objective measures (such as predicted versus actual exam results).

Positive Illusions are not a quirk of certain experiments or certain people, ‘studies uniformly find that normal adults are optimistic.’ Indeed, the positive illusions bias is now considered a standard component of mental health. Note that ‘optimism as an illusion’ is distinct from ‘optimism as a delusion: Illusions are responsive, albeit reluctantly, to reality, whereas delusions are not.’ Positive illusions do not blind us, they blinker us.

The theory of positive illusions encompasses a wide variety of empirical findings from across the experimental and social psychology literature. This veritable mountain of research documents numerous Pollyanna-like principles, spanning people’s ‘disproportionate interest in and recall of positive over negative self-relevant information, attribution tendencies to take credit for good outcomes, tendency to see themselves more positively than others see them, and perception of self as better than peers on positive qualities and not as likely as peers to possess negative personal qualities.’ Such effects, among others, suggest that people have ‘a robust and general self-enhancement tendency.’

That traits inherent to human biology and brain function influence decision-making is now well established. Systematic deviations from the predictions of traditional rational choice theory have been discovered in numerous contexts (mainly by experimental economists and psychologists). These biases are thought to have originated in the way that evolution fashioned the brain’s architectural mechanisms (our ‘hardware’ constraints, as it were), and in the heuristic rules-of-thumb that people use to make decisions within these constraints (our ‘software’). Deviations since the early work on positive illusions, which includes hundreds of publications. See Taylor, S.E. and J.D. Brown (1994) ‘Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction’ Psychological Bulletin 116: 21-27; Armor, D.A. and S.E. Taylor (1998) ‘Situated Optimism: Specific Outcome Expectancies and Self-Regulation’ Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 30: 309-379; Taylor, S.E., J.S. Lerner, D.K. Sherman, et al. (2003) ‘Portrait of the Self-Enhancer: Well Adjusted and Well Liked or Maladjusted and Friendless’ Personality Processes and Individual Differences 84: 165-176.


from rationality are widespread across cultures, so they are not just oddities of western culture. Many of these biases have also been found to have clear proximate origins in the processes of neurobiology and endocrinology, so we can no longer reject them as circumstantial. Despite these advances, the idea that such knowledge can be translated into a new understanding of international relations is relatively new and much under appreciated, but offers to vastly improve our understanding and theory building. Before going on to present the evidence for positive illusions, I will briefly outline how they fit with and contribute to current international relations theory on the causes of war.

POSITIVE ILLUSIONS AND THE CAUSES OF WAR

I propose the hypothesis that international conflict may be partly caused by the human tendency to exhibit overly-positive illusions of themselves, of their capabilities, of their in-group, of their control over events, and of their future, all of which lead to an exaggerated assessment of their relative superiority in a potential war. Before the term positive illusions was ever coined, Robert Jervis already exposed how over-confident assessments from miscalculations would directly endanger international relations through false perceptions of one’s power, of the enemy, or of intelligence information. Positive illusions actually predict that decision-makers will succumb to over-confident assessments – in a systematically positive direction. I argue in the present section that this has implications for both rational choice theory and neorealist theory in international relations.

‘Rationalist approaches’ to understanding war in international relations scholarship hold that states – like the decision-makers that run them – act as if they calculate the probabilities and utilities of all possible outcomes, and then choose the best available ‘utility-maximizing’ option. As with many other psychological biases, the empirical phenomenon of positive illusions makes such rationalist approaches an overly simplistic model of reality. The point I want to make here is that, as positive illusions are often relative – i.e. comparisons of self to others – they predict an under-estimation of others as well as an over-estimation of oneself. This increases the chance of two opponents both believing that they can defeat the other, and thus that both willingly go to war. Positive illusions therefore offer a novel solution to the so-called ‘War Puzzle’ among rational choice theorists:

‘On close inspection none of the principal rationalist arguments [for war] advanced in the literature holds up as an explanation because none addresses or adequately resolves the central puzzle, namely, that war is costly and risky, so rational states should have incentives to locate negotiated settlements that all would prefer to the gamble of war. The common flaw of the standard rationalist argument is that they fail either to address or to explain adequately what prevents leaders from reaching \textit{ex ante} (prewar) bargains that would avoid the costs and risks of

---

A coherent rationalist explanation for war must do more than give reasons why armed conflict might appear an attractive option to a rational leader under some circumstances – it must show why states are unable to locate an alternative outcome that both would prefer to a fight.\textsuperscript{40}

Note that even rational war winners should prefer to negotiate to save the costs of fighting. However, a settlement can only be reached if both sides agreed on the probable outcome of a war – and thus how much each should concede without actually fighting it out. Positive illusions predict that decision-makers do not rationally calculate the correct outcomes. Rather, states are predicted to over-estimate the probability of victory and thus prefer war to any prewar settlement that the adversary would accept.

Another dominant paradigm in international relations is ‘neorealism.’ This branch of theory holds that the causes of war are to be found in the structure of the world’s ‘anarchic international system.’ States must strive for power in order to protect themselves, because there is no overarching authority to police them. According to this theory, therefore, the system leaves open the underlying potential for war among egoistic rival states.\textsuperscript{41} However, anarchy and uncertainty about others’ intentions is held to be a constant, but wars sometimes occur and sometimes do not. So the key question is: What explains the variation in war and peace? Neorealism offers an account of motive – the underlying causes of war. It does not, however, offer an account of the proximate causes of war – the spark that initiates conflict. Neorealism can explain broad changes in the likelihood of war (since this may vary with changes in power among states, and with the ‘polarity’ of the system – is it a unipolar, bipolar or multipolar world?), but it does not predict when wars will occur.\textsuperscript{42}

While genuine power differences sometimes offer unambiguous opportunities for powerful states to exploit their advantage – choosing war to gain power – neorealists (like rational choice theorists) tend to see war as very costly for both sides (even for the victor). They therefore usually invoke states’ misperceptions or mistakes in evaluating power differences as the proximate cause of wars. However, neorealism and rational choice accounts remain incomplete because they do not explain the source of these misperceptions. Positive illusions offer two sources.

First, although misperceptions or mistakes may occur in either direction (i.e. leaning an actor either towards or away from war), one factor that has been consistently invoked throughout the historiography of war is so-called ‘false optimism.’ This is the tendency for wars to be associated with over-confidence. Several scholars who expressly examined the causes of war found this to be a common theme, notably Geoffrey Blainey, John Stoessinger, Stephen Van Evera and

\textsuperscript{41} Waltz, K.N. (1979) Theory of International Politics McGraw-Hill, New York; Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001) The Tragedy of Great Power Politics Norton, New York. Mearsheimer argues that states worry about others capabilities, not intentions. Since the latter are unknowable, states always have to assume the worst. His version of Neorealism (‘offensive realism’) ‘tends to treat states like black boxes or billiard balls. For example, it does not matter for the theory whether Germany in 1905 was led by Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm, or Adolf Hitler, or whether Germany was democratic or autocratic.’ He admits that the ‘omitted factors’ will sometimes come to dominate and the theory is violated, but theories are always necessarily simplifications of reality, see p. 11.
\textsuperscript{42} Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001) The Tragedy of Great Power Politics Norton, New York Details of the predictions are disputed among different versions of realism.
Positive Illusions and the War Puzzle

Sumit Ganguly. They each concluded that, while the desire for power might always be the underlying force, the actual outbreak of wars are normally associated with over-optimism and over-confidence – states tend to over-estimate themselves, their allies, or the benefits and swiftness of war, but to under-estimate their opponents’ capabilities, their allies, their intentions, or the costs and duration of war.

Second, Stephen Van Evera has argued that wars do not start just because of actual or perceived gross differences in the relative power between two states. Rather, that wars result from actual or perceived differences in four specific aspects of relative power: the offence-defence balance between the two states (or alliances), the size of a first-mover advantage, power fluctuations creating windows of opportunity, and the chance to cumulatively obtain more resources (i.e. when gaining one resource facilitates gaining a second). A key conclusion of Van Evera’s study is that wars usually begin not when a state correctly identifies these opportunities, but rather when a state exaggerates these opportunities. That is to say, when a state perceives, wrongly, that conquest will be easy, that there is a first-mover advantage, that there is a window of opportunity to exploit or, finally, that accumulating resources will facilitate gaining even more in the future. Thus, from this perspective, the kindling for wars is ultimately prepared by the underlying structure of the system, but they are ignited by a state falsely believing it has a superior stance in one or more of four specific areas.

Despite this recurring indictment of false optimism as a cause of war – it seems to be a factor that just won’t go away – it has gained little theoretical attention. I believe this is, first of all, because there are no good origin stories for why it occurs (why should states systematically overrate their relative power?). As Van Evera notes, a theory is not ultimately satisfying ‘if it leaves us wondering what causes the cause proposed by the theory. This happens when theories point to familiar causes whose causes, in turn, are a mystery.’ Second, because optimism is very difficult to test (the outcome of war is a complex event highly dependent on chance, so how does one know, after the fact, that a state was too over-confident?). The knock-on effects of disturbing a complex system are impossible to predict with accuracy. ‘Systems often display nonlinear relationships, outcomes cannot be understood by adding together the units or their relations, and many of the results of actions are unintended.’ I will directly confront these methodological problems in order to probe the compelling hypothesis that positive illusions explain the origin of the long noted but so far mysterious false optimism.

44 These four aspects of power may be perceived as exaggerated for all competitors, as well as for oneself. Thus, they could have either a positive or negative influence. For example, perceived easy conquest may generate an undue fear of attack, as well as undue expectation of easy pickings. However, even if a state is too fearful because it has exaggerated the ease of conquest for everyone, if it decides to go to war to escape vulnerability it must be especially optimistic, since the war will be even more difficult against an enemy who can also exploit the advantage of easy conquest. This is supported by 20th century wars: Of the great power states that provoked war because they feared for their security, a majority were destroyed. See Van Evera, S. (1999) Causes of War Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
The positive illusions hypothesis therefore adds something that neorealism and rational choice approaches cannot tell us. It predicts that misperceptions will be systematically biased in a positive (i.e. self-serving) direction, and thus explains why misperceptions are so frequently associated with war. It also offers an origin for such a bias, as stemming from a beneficial strategy in our evolutionary past. While the underlying causes of wars and crises (including those studied later in this thesis) are already well established, an appreciation of positive illusions may help to understand why leaders choose to risk war, or sue for peace, at the times that they did. My case studies are intended to discover whether positive illusions are a potential contributory element of war initiation, not ‘the’ single cause. I myself argue that the desire for security and power imposed by the anarchic international system forms much of the underlying cause, and that this is modified by domestic politics, organisational biases and the personalities involved. Positive illusions help pull the trigger – they are a proximate explanation.

**POSITIVE ILLUSIONS: THEORY AND EVIDENCE**

**Self-Deception is Common and Evolutionarily Adaptive**

Why would people be systematically biased in their judgement? Surely accuracy is crucial to effective decision-making? In fact, this is not always the case. Many apparently illogical biases lend us powerful heuristic rules-of-thumb that, in the environment in which our brains evolved, furnished us with highly adaptive tools. These heuristics often appear biased to us today because they evolved to compensate for challenges which are now absent from modern life. For example, people crave sugar because it used to be scarce and important, but we carry on doing so today even when it is detrimental to health.\(^47\) Daniel Nettle put it like this: ‘Evolutionary psychology describes a human being who is logically quirky, but highly effective at producing the right behavioural decisions under realistic constraints of time, capacity and uncertainty, in the rich social environment in which we evolved.’\(^48\) In a paper published in 2000, the evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers argued that not only do we have such biases, but also that the process of evolution has hidden many of them from us via built-in mechanisms of self-deception. Indeed, he argues that self-deception itself plays a widespread and important role in many aspects of human behaviour and decision-making. Numerous examples of self- and other-deception even in non-human animals (especially in conflict situations), implies that it has an ancient origin in the evolution of the brain.\(^49\) Humans themselves


have an uncanny acuity with regard to detecting cheats – we are extremely sensitive to behavioural cues and facial expressions associated with lying and deception, indicating that this ability has been under significant selective pressure in our evolution. As Trivers argues, in order to subvert these ever-improving detection mechanisms, many aspects of our behaviour have become self-deceptive, because this removes the possibility that we physically betray our own lies (if one does not know one is lying, it is impossible for another individual to detect the lie by observing our behaviour). Thus, self-deception may be highly adaptive if it increases the credibility of a bluff.

Positive illusions appear to be such a self-deceptive trait. A number of empirical studies suggest that accurate information is in fact available, but that it remains concealed in a subconscious part of our brain until needed (i.e. until it emerges in some other context). This implies that positive illusions represent a self-serving bias via self-deception and do not constitute an assessment error arising from some deficiency in cognitive processing. In other words, they must have been somehow adaptive in our evolution. This is an important distinction because humans have been shown to exhibit a number of psychological biases that appear to be simply errors of calculation (rather than adaptive heuristics).

Empirical Evidence for Positive Illusions

Positive illusions are not just peculiarities of certain experimental tests. They are long established, widespread, pan cultural, robust, and arise in astonishingly diverse contexts. Numerous studies show that the majority of people consistently over-rate various qualities such as their health, leadership ability, professional competence, sporting ability, and ethics, and positive illusions are also evident when people assess themselves as a team. People hold unrealistically positive


evaluations not only of themselves, but also of their control over events (especially when chance-determined), and of the future. All such biases are compounded because people are often not aware that they are wrong and, as Darwin noted, ‘ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge.’

Here are some specific examples: people tend to see themselves as being better than others with respect to intelligence, attractiveness, fairness, or skill (there are separate studies on each trait). They also believe they have higher than average morals, health, and managerial skills. People tend to believe they are more likely than others to have gifted children and get a good first job, do well on future tasks, and that they will be happier, more confident, more hardworking, and less lonely in the future than their peers. One study even found that 94% of college professors believe that they do above average work! People are also overly optimistic about negative events: people tend to believe they will live longer than average, will not be victims of car accidents, crime, earthquakes, will not get ill, suffer depression, or have unwanted pregnancies. A review of this literature in 1994 reported that ‘evidence for unrealistic optimism in normal samples is voluminous and continues to grow. According to [one source], there are at least 121 articles on perceived invulnerability and optimistic biases about risk and future life events alone.’

People also over-estimate their ability to control what are in fact uncontrollable events, or other people’s behaviour. For example, when playing Prisoner’s Dilemma games, subjects have been found to act as if they can control the simultaneous decision of the other player, even when this was impossible. In bargaining situations, people tend to overweight views that favour themselves, to be overly optimistic about achievable outcomes, and to be over-confident that they will attain them. After the event, people tend to attribute failures to uncooperative and unethical practices by the opponent, not to themselves. Their self-serving evaluations also tend to inadvertently increase the costs of conflict by preventing combined gains and delaying agreement, which leads to escalation. People also over-estimate their abilities in much more intricate but less conspicuous ways. For example, people tend to ‘think they are tapping more sources of information than they are, over-estimate the degree to which they combine evidence in complex ways, and flatter themselves by thinking that they search for subtle and elusive clues to others’ behaviour.’

Positive illusions vary among people and contexts (more on this in Chapter 3), but ‘the evidence clearly indicates that most people anticipate that their future will be brighter than can reasonably be justified on statistical grounds.’ Such effects are now so common in the literature that they have been combined to build a general theory for why positive illusions are essential to mental health and how they serve useful functions.

---


65 Taylor, S.E. and J.D. Brown (1994) 'Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction' Psychological Bulletin 116: 21-27 p. 27. Recent studies have further corroborated the positive illusions perspective by directly testing the theory against two competing alternatives (see Taylor, S.E., J.S. Lerner, D.K. Sherman, et al. (2003) 'Portrait of the Self-Enhancer: Well Adjusted and Well Liked or Maladjusted and Friendless' Personality Processes and Individual Differences 84: 165-176). The first alternative theory had suggested that self-enhancement could be dysfunctional (negatively related to mental health) if one’s self-enhancement became too great (this is known as ‘defensive neuroticism’). The second alternative theory proposed that there is a curvilinear relationship – an ‘optimal margin of illusion’ (see Baumeister, R.F. (1989) 'The Optimal Margin of Illusion' Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology 8: 176-189) – such that a middling amount of self-enhancement is advantageous, but too much becomes detrimental. A research team headed by Shelley Taylor set up a tightly controlled experiment specifically designed to distinguish these alternative theories, using multiple measures of mental health (to avoid other possible sources of error), and multiple assessments (they examined self-assessments, friends’ assessments and clinical evaluations by psychologists). They found the typical evidence of positive illusions and little evidence for the two alternative theories.

66 Taylor, S.E. (1989) Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind Basic Books, New York. Humans are sometimes cited as being ‘risk-averse.’ That is, they often act and behave cautiously as if to avoid the
The applicability of psychological biases to political phenomena is sometimes criticized because they are discovered in laboratory experiments involving relatively small sample sizes (typically of around 100 people). However, in addition to the never-ending replications of positive illusions studies, a survey of 1 million high school students found similar effects. Indeed, 70% rated themselves as above average in leadership ability (only 2% rated themselves below average), and 60% rated themselves above normal athletic ability (only 6% below). Every single one of them rated themselves as at least average in their ability to get along with others, 60% placed themselves in the top 10%, and a whopping 25% placed themselves in the top 1%!

Applications of psychological phenomena are also sometimes criticized on another count: That laboratory experiments often use college students as subjects, which are then assumed to represent humans in general. However, much of the evidence for positive illusions has come from research on athletes and people with various illnesses, who represent a much broader cross-section of personality types, education, ages, experience, and professions. To sum up, the numerous replications, large sample tests, and diverse subject groups suggest an unusually high degree of robustness and generalizability in the literature on positive illusions.

Are Positive Illusions Over-represented Among Leaders?

It is important enough to discover that normal people have systematic positive illusions. However, it is easy to imagine that military and political leaders, particularly those who reach top decision-making positions, are likely to be at the high end of this distribution – i.e. having especially pronounced self-esteem, perceived (and desired) control over events, and optimism that they can change the future for the better. In his book on the careers of U.S. presidents, Richard Shenkman argues that unrelenting ambition and drive to succeed is a key character trait all the way from the Washington to Clinton. Even odd examples like Lincoln who started life uneducated and in poverty, appear to have started out ‘full of optimism,’ and later would say that ‘no man knows, when that presidential grub gets gnawing at him, just how deep it will get until he has tried it.’

Unfortunately, there is little evidence to directly compare the positive illusions of leaders with those consequences of potentially damaging events. For example, they take out insurance that is rarely claimed, overweigh small-probability events, and heavily discount the value of commodities over time, see Kahneman, D. and A. Tversky (1979) ‘Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decisions under Risk’ Econometrica 47: 263-291; Kagel, J.H. and A.E. Roth (Eds.) (1995) The Handbook of Experimental Economics, Princeton University Press, Princeton. However, risk-aversion is specific to particular (often money related) contexts, and the weight of evidence in the literature shows that in other contexts the bias is positive: ‘The evidence on this point is clear: Most healthy adults are positively biased in their self-perceptions’ (Taylor, S.E. and J.D. Brown (1994) ‘Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction’ Psychological Bulletin 116: 21-27, p. 23, See also the many references therein and these authors’ previous work.) Thus, although in certain circumstances people are cautious, under-confident, or simply unsure of their capabilities, on average, ‘most people view themselves, the world, and the future in a considerably more positive light than reality can sustain.’ (Bazerman, M.H., J.R. Curhan, D.A. Moore, et al. (2000) ‘Negotiation’ Annual Review of Psychology 51: 279-314)


of the average person, so I will defer a fuller discussion of this tentative but important possibility to the conclusions.

THE ADVANTAGES OF POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

There is overwhelming empirical evidence that positive illusions serve useful functions. Although self-deceptive, positive illusions can be advantageous because, even if wrong by objective standards, they enable individuals or groups to be more effective in striving for and achieving mental or physical goals, as if a self-fulfilling prophecy. People with high self-perceptions, for example, are more likely to attain success than those whose views are modest, and this is true even if perceptions are exaggerated.69 Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown find that positive illusions lead to ‘higher motivation, greater persistence, more effective performance and ultimately, greater success.’70 This makes intuitive sense because ‘if self-efficacy beliefs always reflected only what people could do routinely, they would rarely fail but they would not mount the extra effort needed to surpass their ordinary performances.’71 As Roy Baumeister put it: ‘the lack of illusions may leave people reluctant to undertake certain ambitious, risky projects that often may yield the greatest successes and advances. And, of course, when actual performance is involved, the realist has to do without the benefits of confidence, such as the self-fulfilling prophecy effects of thinking that one can accomplish something terrific.’72 Robert Franks, an economist, also recognized the ‘widely held view that self-confidence enhances a person’s performance, and that positive self-perceptions, even if somewhat illusory by objective standards, tend to serve people well in life.’73 A U.S. National Institute of Mental Health report on the state of behavioural science noted ‘considerable evidence suggests positive psychological benefits for people who believe their future will be rosier than they have any right to expect. Such optimism keeps people in a positive mood, motivates them to work toward future goals, fosters creative, productive work, and gives them a sense of being in control of their destiny.’74

The anthropologist Richard Wrangham has proposed that, over our long evolutionary history of inter-group warfare, positive illusions enhanced performance in combat and warfare. Significant to this claim is the finding that positive illusions are exaggerated in threatening circumstances, such

---

as might be experienced in the stress of conflict (see Chapter 3). As long as they improved fighting ability, then ultimately positive illusions would improve survival and reproductive success and be favoured by natural selection over the course of human evolution. This is especially salient given that warfare among hunter-gatherer societies appears to have had critical consequences for access to materials and resources, as well as reproductive opportunities (wars were sometimes waged to capture women). Wrangham’s original warfare-based theory is, if anything, conservative, because it excludes the influence of inter-personal combat, one-on-one disputes, bargaining, attracting allies, and deterring rivals, all of which were presumably much more common challenges than war, and yet all of these were likely to benefit from the advantages of positive illusions too.

Nevertheless, even focussing on inter-group warfare alone, Wrangham argues that the degree of selection pressure on fighting ability has been unusually strong because warfare was frequent and severe throughout human evolution. Among hunter-gatherers, an extensive review by Lawrence Keeley estimated that warfare has been responsible for a death rate of around 0.5% of their populations per year. This seems a small number, but in the 20th century this would have resulted in the equivalent of over 2 billion war deaths (the actual number was ‘only’ 100 million – bad enough, of course). Keeley also found that 8 – 59% of male deaths among tribal societies were due to warfare. This contrasts with a figure of less than 1% for the U.S. and Europe combined in the 20th century, and that was considered to be a bloody century. Keeley’s evidence combines archaeological data on prehistoric societies, and contemporary data on hunter-gatherer societies that have been studied in recent times. Both strongly suggest that fighting was one of the most important selective pressures in our evolutionary history. As Wrangham put it, ‘a selective regime lasting several million years, affecting a behaviour responsible for a major source of mortality and reproductive success, is, of course, likely to have had substantial effects on psychological evolution.’

Why Would Positive Illusions Promote Success in Conflict?

There are two distinct processes by which positive illusions might confer advantages in warfare and, thereby, increase what is know in the trade as ‘military effectiveness’ (see Table 2.1). Richard Wrangham described in detail how these would have become naturally selected over our

---

80 Ibid., p. 196-197.
evolutionary history in a stimulating article in the journal *Evolution and Human Behaviour*.\(^{82}\) The idea is that positive illusions would provide a competitive advantage ‘either by suppression of disadvantageous thoughts or feelings, or through an arm’s race of bluffing’ – two complementary strategies that became labelled as ‘Performance Enhancement’ and ‘Opponent Deception’ (the latter is essentially sub-conscious ‘bluffing’).\(^{83}\) Both processes, however, reduce the accuracy of mutual assessments, and thereby increase risk-taking. So while they may increase military effectiveness on the one hand, they also tend to promote conflict and overzealous war initiation on the other – especially perhaps in modern times where war can be triggered by those who do not face its consequences. The two processes are described below.

1) **Performance Enhancement**

An exaggerated assessment of one’s own capability stemming from positive illusions may increase the probability of winning *via deception of oneself*. Positive illusions have been demonstrated to suppress thoughts or feelings that would interrupt progress towards a goal and to increase the chance of success as a result: ‘Optimism leads to continued efforts to attain the goal, whereas pessimism leads to giving up.’\(^{84}\) This is more effective if one genuinely believes the goal is attainable, hence the self-deception. As psychologists Shelley Taylor and Peter Gollwitzer explain, ‘somewhat distorting ones’ resources, one’s chances for success, and the beneficence of the environment may enable people to strive longer and harder to reach their goals, thus bringing about a self-fulfilling prophecy. Moreover, unbroken persistence is vital if implementation is to be successful, especially in the face of hindrances and barriers.\(^{85}\) According to this logic, positive illusions can increase the probability of winning conflicts by enhancing performance via increased resolve. The indispensable competitiveness and aggressive spirit of a Marine platoon captures the essence of the idea.

2) **Opponent Deception (Sub-conscious ‘bluffing’)**

An exaggerated assessment of one’s own capability stemming from positive illusions may also increase the probability of winning *via deception of the opponent*, since confident behaviour and the signal it elicits increases the chance of successfully bluffing the enemy into believing that he cannot, or is unlikely, to win. Bluffs are more likely to be believed by your opponent if you are not aware – even yourself – that you are only bluffing (because then there can be no behavioural

\(^{82}\) Ibid., p. 6.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 4. The word ‘bluff’ implies conscious deception, but the positive illusions hypothesis suggests that the bluff occurs sub-consciously (i.e. one is not aware of over-estimating oneself), hence the term ‘opponent-deception.’ The Collins Dictionary (London, 1987) gives the definition of ‘bluff’ as: (1) ‘To pretend to be confident about an uncertain issue in order to influence (someone).’ (2) ‘Deliberate deception intended to create the impression of a stronger position that one actually has.’ The meaning and effects are the same in my usage of bluffing here; all that is different is the proposition that the bluff is achieved by the evolution of sub-consciously exaggerated confidence.


\(^{85}\) Taylor, S.E. and P.M. Gollwitzer (1995) *The Effects of Mindset on Positive Illusions* Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 69: 213-226, p. 224. They continue: ‘It is not surprising, then, that people who are in the process of implementing an intended project do not reflect on its value in an evenhanded manner. Such deliberation would undermine their illusions and, thus, hinder efficient goal achievement.’
‘leakage’ to give the game away).\textsuperscript{86} Thus, positive illusions, though sub-conscious and self-deceptive, serve to prevent betraying the bluff because self-deception ‘reduces inadvertent signalling of weakness.’\textsuperscript{87} This may also affect the intensity as well as the occurrence of war: ‘Because self-deception reduces perceived opponent asymmetry, it should cause opponents to fight more intensely (e.g. longer and riskier bouts).’\textsuperscript{88} The outcomes of such conflict will also be less predictable as they become less and less dependent on material strength alone.\textsuperscript{89}

**Other Mechanisms**

There are also indirect ways that positive illusions may help in conflict (not in Wrangham’s original paper). First, resolve and bluffing may be observed by third parties, deterring potential rivals for the future (‘Dominance need not be competitive. It can arise from strong personal characteristics that produce admiration and deference in others’).\textsuperscript{90} Second, third-party observation may attract potential allies hoping to benefit from an apparently strong partner. Third, a belief in superiority may encourage pre-emptive action, which often lends a competitive edge (taking the initiative, striking first or an ‘offensive bias’ are commonly cited advantages in military strategy and international relations). Fourth, if bluffing is advantageous but sometimes fails, then positive illusions in the performance enhancement domain may be especially crucial to effectively fight

\textsuperscript{86} Trivers, R.L. (2000) *The Elements of a Scientific Theory of Self-Deception* *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 907: 114-131. The positive illusions hypothesis implies that it is advantageous to bluff an opponent into thinking that one is stronger than is true. However, complacency is a potential danger if perceived superiority leads to letting down one’s guard; again there is clearly some optimal balance between the two extremes. Sometimes, the opposite strategy may serve a useful function – duping one’s enemy into overconfidence by acting weak going into battle might make him complacent and misallocate resources. But if one is trying to avoid conflict, or trying to force concessions without resorting to violence, then it is usually advantageous to bluff strength – after all, this is the basis of deterrence theory. In addition, in Rose McDermott’s war game experiments, subjects sometimes chose to bluff strength, but they never chose to bluff weakness McDermott, R. and J. Cowden (In Press) ‘Hostile Communication in a Crisis Simulation Game’.

\textsuperscript{87} Wrangham, R. (1999) ‘Is Military Incompetence Adaptive?’ *Evolution and Human Behaviour* 20: 3-17, p.13. The two mechanisms of positive illusions – performance enhancement and opponent deception – can of course be deliberate as well as arising from non-conscious tendencies. Any person may decide to implement these mechanisms on purpose, as a conscious strategy, whether or not they may experience some underlying sub-conscious influence of positive illusions in addition (both conscious and non-conscious components may operate simultaneously – they are not mutually exclusive). However, they can be distinguished because if they are conscious they should be reflected in public but not in private. I make this distinction in my case studies by separating deliberate ‘showy’ signals of resolve or bluff, consciously designed and intended to deceive other actors, from beliefs that were more optimistic than available information should have recommended. In reality, conscious and unconscious behaviour may sometimes become blurred with each other. That is, positive illusions may make it easier to reinforce one’s own conviction about some fact, even if the interpretation of those facts was largely invented in the first place. For example, before the Second World War Mussolini became enchanted and came to believe the very propaganda about Italian power that he had himself orchestrated in order to bluff others (see Taylor, A.J.P. (1977) *The War Lords* Penguin, London).

\textsuperscript{88} We used this prediction to test for evidence of positive illusions in a data set of historical battles. While the results supported the presence of opponent-deception over the performance enhancement mechanism, other interpretations of the results were difficult to rule out. See Johnson, D.D.P., R.W. Wrangham and S.P. Rosen (2002) ‘Is Military Incompetence Adaptive? An Empirical Test with Risk-Raking Behaviour in Modern Warfare’ *Evolution & Human Behaviour* 23: 245-264.

one’s way out of a corner (i.e. when one’s bluff is called). Fifth, a tendency to take up challenges can exploit luck, inadvertently exploiting hidden weaknesses in rivals that one might otherwise have left alone. Of course, one risks taking on more powerful opponents too, but as Daniel Nettle’s work shows (see Chapter 1 and Appendix 1.1), the net gain of over-estimates can be exceed those of accuracy or under-estimates. A rational assessment never to challenge apparently equal or stronger adversaries would therefore leave potential winnings untapped.

* * *

For positive illusions to be adaptive, the simple condition is that over the long run those ‘with positive illusions tend to succeed sufficiently often that it pays to have such illusions. Miscalculations then result from a trade-off between successful and failed bluffs, rather than from an inherent inability to assess correctly.’ 91 Despite the havoc caused by such miscalculations every now and then, which may precipitate more war than otherwise would be the case, positive illusions remain advantageous in conflict because without them, an actor would be too cautious or out-bluffed. This rings true in the real world; while war may be a scourge on society, there has rarely been a shortage of those ready to exploit others who shy away from it:

‘In a competitive world, those with positive illusions do well. But like nuclear weapons, which are similarly helpful to the antagonist that possesses them, they are a liability because they intensify the harm of fighting. The same could probably be said for various closely related psychological features that enable groups to win, from dehumanising the foe, to group-thinking conformity, to having male leaders. Globally, these traits probably intensify the risk of fighting, and certainly increase the costs. But because the strong survive, they can only be reduced through binding agreements among all players to abandon them.’ 92

**Why Don’t Positive Illusions Cancel Each Other Out?**

People often remark that such a mechanism should be stalemated – what is the point of having positive illusions if your opponent also has positive illusions blinding him to reality? Does this not predict that any advantage would be cancelled out? As Wrangham explains, this is not so at all:

‘This result is “globally maladaptive” (in the sense that self-deception reduces the fitness of the average individual), in the same way as most investment in aggressive anatomy or behaviour. As a parallel example, the canine teeth of male baboons *Papio anubis* have evolved to be long and sharp, due to an evolutionary arm’s race among male baboons to possess the most effective weapons. One result is that their canine teeth regularly cause wounds in females and other males. In this sense, the evolution of canine teeth is disadvantageous for the average individual, compared to a hypothetical baboon species in which males have short, blunt canine teeth. In a similar way, I suggest that self-deception has been positively selected in military contests,

because without it a player would be less effective (e.g., hesitant or out-bluffed). Nevertheless, the unfortunate result is that conflicts are more frequent and severe than they would be without it. Thus, self-deception in conflicts is disadvantageous for the species as a whole.\textsuperscript{93}

Hence, if in the past positive illusions were an adaptive strategy, then they are fully predicted to be ubiquitous – and indeed apparent in both sides of a conflict – because they represent an arms race. Any dangerous adaptation (large canines, horns, aggression, fighting itself) may decrease the mean fitness of a population, but natural selection acts on individual self-interests, not on the population or the species.\textsuperscript{94} Reproductively successful individuals will leave more descendents than less successful individuals, so any trait that confers greater success will be selected for without regard to the population as a whole. Evolution is blind, and the genetic mechanism by which it works means that the selfish advantage of initiating or continuing an arms race is overwhelming. Indeed, in a naive population in which no-one deceived opponents about strength, it would be a well-rewarded strategy to start doing so: Any individual that did would leave more descendents to inherit the trait, so the behaviour would spread rapidly. The opportunity to cheat maintains individual selfishness, regardless of increased mortality risk in the population as a whole.\textsuperscript{95} Positive illusions are not expected to always have positive effects. They had a positive effect on average, over our evolutionary history, but they increase risk-taking behaviour and therefore the likelihood of conflict also.

The above should be a familiar argument for biologists. But the logic should also be familiar to political scientists and game theorists. The occurrence of apparently deleterious traits is identical to the so-called ‘security dilemma’ in international relations: States must arm to defend themselves because there is no overarching authority to protect them, but arming leads other states to arm too. What is the point in building up armaments to enhance security if your adversary just does the same? It increases fear in the rival, increases the danger of accidents, increases the chance of war, increases the devastation if war does occur and, ultimately, if both sides’ armaments match each other, it doesn’t increase security in the end anyway – hence the dilemma.\textsuperscript{96} This is also a simple game theoretical result. In many types of social dilemma games, rational players end up in a state of mutual defection (non-cooperation), even if that outcome is ‘pareto-deficient’ – meaning that everyone could have done better, in retrospect. In other words, stupid though it may seem in hindsight, defection still occurs despite it being costly and self-defeating in the long run. Rational actors defect from cooperative outcomes because they are unable to guarantee that others will also behave in good faith, so they defect to avoid being exploited. Even if everyone sees and understands the costs involved, incomplete information regarding the other sides’ intentions means that both sides fall into the pareto-deficient abyss of mutual defection from which it is difficult to escape. If


\textsuperscript{94} See Dawkins, R. (1986) \textit{The Selfish Gene} Oxford University Press, Oxford for a review of this literature.


\textsuperscript{96} The exception is when both sides achieve a second-strike nuclear capability (that is, when each can absorb a nuclear attack and still launch its own nuclear counter-attack), in which case both can smash each others’ civilizations to smithereens regardless of who starts the war. In such a world of mutually assured destruction, the security dilemma is in some ways averted. Big problems remain, however, because accidents and misperceptions can still cause war, and all the unnecessarily heightened devastation that it would bring.
one sees the danger but fails to respond, then one just magnifies the dilemma because the threat becomes greater. This has an interesting consequence: It may be better to maintain a benchmark assumption that the threat is always real, to ensure that one errs on the side of caution so as to react appropriately to avoid danger in the first place.\(^7\) Hence, in an anarchic international system full of states jostling to protect their own security, it may be better to err on the side of having positive illusions rather than not.

**Table 2.1** Consequences of positive illusions for conflict in our evolutionary past compared with their consequences for conflict today. The proposition is that our evolutionary history of competition led to the natural selection of positive illusions, which by either of two mechanisms conferred adaptive advantages in combat: First, by increasing resolve (performance enhancement), and second, by bluffing the opponent (opponent deception). The evolutionary arms race would ensure that positive illusions spread in the population because these two mechanisms enhanced ‘military effectiveness’ (the glory), despite their tendency to increase the likelihood and intensity of war (the havoc). Modern war and modern weapons make the costs and harm of positive illusions greater today than in the past.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enhanced military effectiveness</th>
<th>Increased likelihood and intensity of war</th>
<th>Severity of failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evolutionary Past</strong></td>
<td><strong>YES</strong></td>
<td><strong>YES</strong></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Environment of evolutionary adaptation, i.e. past 5-7 million years)</td>
<td>(Adaptive)</td>
<td>(Globally maladaptive)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Today</strong></td>
<td><strong>DEPENDS (^*)</strong></td>
<td><strong>YES</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Modern times, i.e. past 10,000 years)</td>
<td>(Sometimes advantageous, sometimes not)</td>
<td>(Globally maladaptive)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\) Highly contingent on situation, context and role. See Chapters 2, 3 and 8.

---

THE HAVOC AND GLORY OF POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

The two main strategies by which positive illusions increase military effectiveness (performance enhancement and opponent deception) nestle neatly with Thomas Hobbes’ quip that ‘force, and fraud, are in war the cardinal virtues.’ Although both strategies are risky, it is the taking of the risk that may reap large rewards. In his analysis of positive illusions, Baumeister agreed that ‘it would be reckless to propose that overconfidence always leads to disaster, for sometimes remarkable successes crown improbable, seemingly foolish undertakings.’ If one must fight, then it can be better to confront the danger assertively than to wait until the other side takes the initiative. As G. K. Chesterton suggested, ‘the paradox of courage is that a man must be a little careless of his life even in order to keep it.’ After all, an aggressive attack (or threat posture) may frighten the other side into backing down without so much as a blow being struck. And if it does come to a life or death struggle, then all the better to fight confidently – natural selection would be unmerciful to hesitant, nervous or frightened losers. Combatants have often been noted to benefit from enhanced psychological states of self-assurance. ‘By working themselves up to a state of extreme excitement, warriors could sometimes mount reckless attacks and tip the balance between victory and defeat. Moros in the Philippines amazed American soldiers by such behaviour as recently as 1911; Viking berserkers had done the same in Europe a millennium before.’ Obviously, these are extreme examples, but they illustrate the point well: That it could ‘tip the balance’ supports the proposition that positive illusions can help to win.

One of Napoleon’s marshals, Philibert Séurier, had an ‘uneventful career’ apart from a extraordinary moment during the campaign in northern Italy in 1796. According to David Rooney, ‘French troops were pinned down by the Austrians and suffering casualties, when Séurier suddenly jumped on his horse, drew his sword, and charged straight at the enemy.’ The significant part of this story is the result: The enemy ‘fled in panic.’ The Italians, Machiavelli among them, long spoke of the ‘furia francese’ after the battle of Fornoue, to characterize the impetuous fighting spirit of the French. As Clausewitz reminds us, ‘boldness’ must not go too far nor be too extreme at the higher levels of command, but for those in combat it is an essential element in an army’s strength: ‘Supposing an equal degree of discernment to be forthcoming in a certain number of cases, a thousand times as many of them will end in disaster through over-anxiety as through boldness … the more boldness lends wings to the mind and the discernment, so much the farther they will reach in their flight.’ The very taking of risk – of daring – can confer a critical advantage in combat.

---

100 Chesterton, G.K. (1908) ‘All Things Considered’.
Bryan Perrett has written many popular books on the extraordinary feats of more determined smaller forces fighting larger but less determined ones.\(^{105}\)

There are many other such examples through history. At the battle of Plassey in India in 1757, Robert Clive’s 3,000 strong British East India Company soldiers defeated Siraj-ud-Daula’s massive army of 50,000 cavalry and infantry, elephants, and more numerous artillery. Lawrence James wrote that ‘what tipped the balance was Clive’s overwhelming self-confidence and offensive spirit which made his army like a tiger,’ implicating the advantage of his inflated resolve. But more interestingly, James continues that Clive’s army ‘never needed to charge if he can scatter his enemies with a roar,’ and at Plassey ‘the roar proved too much for Siraj’s army; it fell apart and fled.’\(^{106}\) A huge victory was won with the minimal cost of supreme confidence.

Positive illusions of one’s capability can be strategically more important than one’s genuine capability. Intriguingly, one of the ‘rational choice’ explanations for war argues that war itself is used as a signal of motivation. States sometimes choose to fight a war – even a losing one, and even if the act of doing so risks exposing material inferiority at the same time – because, as Robert Jervis explains, ‘more important than the display of its lack of military capability could be the display of its resolve, if not foolhardiness.’\(^{107}\) Who wants to fight a crazy opponent? Richard Nixon believed that if he could convince the North Vietnamese that he was essentially mad, then they would be more likely to concede – since he might do anything to win (such as use nuclear weapons).\(^{108}\) Nixon called it the ‘madman theory.’ These anecdotal examples are intended only to illustrate the point that often, as Eisenhower once said, ‘what counts is not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog.’

At times, however, one can lean too far in the other direction and be way too over-confident, like Custer at the Little Big Horn or the Frankish Knight who charged into a sea of Saracens at the battle of Acre in 1291, even though his compatriots had already turned and fled.\(^{109}\) The Duke of Wellington famously noted the ambiguous difference between bravery and folly, and their attendant havoc and glory, when he suggested that ‘there is nothing on earth so stupid as a gallant officer.’\(^{110}\) Bold risk-taking engendered by over-confidence can enhance military effectiveness and bring glory (sensu Clive), but it can also enhance excessive daring and wreak havoc (sensu Custer).

Table 2.1 makes clear that, in our evolutionary past, positive illusions may have been generally adaptive despite making conflict more likely overall. By contrast, in modern war – now we are out of our natural environment and fighting wars on a massive scale – positive illusions may still sometimes bring glory but they are ever more certain to create severe havoc. In both eras, positive illusions can increase fighting effectiveness and increase the probability of war. This thesis is about the latter – positive illusions as a cause of war. However, as I stated at the beginning of the


\(^{110}\) Ibid.
chapter, these two consequences are not-mutually exclusive. If positive illusions are at work, they may promote effective fighting even if they also lead to war more often.

ARE POSITIVE ILLUSIONS STILL ADAPTIVE TODAY?

Humans are fish out of water. Modern life is far removed from our ‘natural’ environment of evolutionary adaptation, where our lineage spent 99% of its 5-7 million year history of independent evolution. By comparison, modern civilizations and large static populations are extremely recent, only around 8,000 years old. Not surprisingly therefore, our brains evolved to deal with the trials and tribulations of living in small groups of hunter-gatherers, not to deal with modern life. Evolution works slowly to extinguish behaviour that does not have a systematic selection pressure against it, so many human traits reflect our past rather than our present. Positive illusions, therefore, may well persist today regardless of their effects.

For positive illusions to be evolutionarily ‘adaptive’ in modern life, there would have to be a systematic selection pressure favouring positive illusions because they promote reproductive success. Whether this is true or not is unknown, but it seems unlikely – do people with higher positive illusions really have more offspring? On the other side of the coin, there is also little reason to expect any systematic selection pressure against positive illusions – people, in general, do not systematically die or fail to reproduce as a result of positive illusions (some might, but it is unlikely to be a widespread effect). I would argue, therefore, that positive illusions are unlikely to meet the strict definition of being evolutionarily adaptive in today’s world.

What we can do, though, is to define positive illusions as an ‘adaptation’ – a human trait which has resulted because it was adaptive at some point in our evolutionary past. If, today, we sometimes drift into situations in which positive illusions do provide advantages, they may still seem ‘adaptive’ in the strategic or common usage sense (as is often argued in the clinical psychology/mental health literature), but not necessarily the evolutionary sense. To avoid any unnecessary confusion in the following discussion, I reject the term ‘adaptive’ and use ‘advantageous’ instead.

In many important contexts positive illusions are advantageous in modern life. They promote self-esteem, mental health, positive attitude, persistence and success in numerous challenges, and health (by, for example, reducing stress that can otherwise compromise the body’s immune defences). Specific studies have demonstrated that positive illusions enhance performance in sporting competitions, academic work, musical composition, cooperative tasks, and even relationships, which may last longer as a result of positive illusions about them.111 Such effects

would have been highly beneficial in our evolutionary past. Positive illusions appear to be held within certain bounds, but remain positive overall, so that to some extent 'they are self-fulfilling, creating the world that we believe already exists.'

However, in modern contexts, there is sometimes conflicting evidence about the positive or negative effects of positive illusions. As Richard Robins and Jennifer Beer note, ‘the question of whether positive illusions are adaptive [today] remains open to empirical enquiry;’ they may only be a ‘mixed blessing.’ For example, Daniel Goleman blames positive illusions for encouraging people to devalue or ignore environmental disaster, so that despite their ‘vital role in the psyche of the healthy individual,’ they are ‘toxic for us as a species … in the face of this peril, we live our daily lives as though nothing had changed.’ Goleman argues that ‘we fool ourselves so easily about the dangers to our species because our illusions work too well. While our emotional and physical well-being is based in part on artful denial and illusion, the state of the world is such that we can no longer afford that artifice.’ It is at the level of the collective, he suggests, that positive illusions ‘lose their utility. For they can have the effect of building a psychological cocoon, a feeling of personal well-being, at the expense of a clearheaded picture of the threats that face us.’

Psychologist Roy Baumeister also notes the ‘risks and dangers’ of positive illusions among normal people. Of numerous self-defeating behaviours found among humans, over a third may involve misjudging the self or social environment in some way, and Baumeister points out that ‘overestimating one’s abilities and likelihood of success can lead one into various undertakings that consume time and energy and produce failure.’ Interestingly for this thesis, he spotted that ‘military operations furnish perhaps the clearest illustration of the dangers of making decisions based on illusions, for the costs of failure are apparent and dramatic.’

However, whether positive illusions are advantageous or disadvantageous in modern warfare is a complex question. For the great majority of our evolution, fighting would have been up close and personal events between small, hunter-gatherer groups. One common feature of ‘primitive’ warfare is that warriors often amass and display to each other before a battle, seemingly to assess relative power. The ability to intimidate may be a key determinant of success. However, such visual factors are lost almost completely in modern war. It is rarely possible to see much of the enemy at all. The scale of modern war and the detachment of modern weapons makes combat, command and

---

115 Ibid., p. 195.
116 Ibid., p. 195.
117 Baumeister, R.F. Ibid.'The Optimal Margin of Illusion' 176-189, p. 177.
118 Ibid., p. 181.
planning much more abstract and isolated from direct feedback. One might suspect, therefore, that while positive illusions may have been advantageous in our past wars, they are not advantageous, or are even a hindrance, in our wars of today. In other words, modern war resembles less and less the scenarios in which positive illusions might help its contestants.

Having said that, the crucial point I want to make here is that although modern war is clearly very different from combat in our evolutionary past, some aspects of modern war will tend to approximate those of our ancestors while others will not. In the former, our evolved responses may serve us as well as ever. In the latter, they may be disastrous. The point to remember, therefore, is that whether positive illusions provide an advantage or not depends on the context.

An analogy may help here. Positive illusions have been identified in both swimming and golf. However, they seem to enhance performance in swimming (perhaps because physical challenges were common in our evolutionary history), but they are counter-productive in golf (perhaps because it has no analogy of any evolutionary salience). As another example, exaggerated confidence is often an advantageous element of management and business practices. Yet positive illusions have been suggested to be one explanation why, in some sectors, 80% of new businesses fail within 10 years. Similarly, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 may have been ‘caused in part by a stock market that had been overextended because of the illusions that America’s boom would not end.’

It seems that, depending on the context in the modern environment, positive illusions may bring us either glory or havoc.

As Baumeister concluded: ‘self-flattering illusions often make a poor basis for action. In many cases there is a process of gradual self-correction through feedback from the social environment. Sometimes, however, great undertakings are attended by great risks, and undue optimism can expose oneself (and one’s associates) to catastrophic outcomes.’

When Are Positive Illusions Advantageous in Modern War?

Positive illusions, like many psychological responses, seem to be ‘switched-on’ or altered by specific stimuli in the environment. This is a neat method for evolution to trigger the right response – providing that the relevant organism is in its native environment of evolutionary adaptation. Only then will the ‘proximate’ stimuli reliably coincide with the ‘ultimate’ advantage of the response. Niko Tinbergen famously cautioned to make this analytical distinction between proximate and ultimate causation – behaviour cannot be correctly understood without doing so. Once humans were transported out of our native habitat into modern life, the same old proximate responses continue to be fired off in the brain in response to relevant stimuli, even if this causes inappropriate

---

behaviours. We often can’t help it. But the ultimate function is no longer necessarily served. What is more, the same triggers in today’s world might be exaggerated versions of those our natural environment, such that they represent ‘super-stimuli’ that elicit disproportionate responses. For example, the signal input of reviewing thousands of troops arrayed ready for war may switch on or multiply positive illusions that – regardless of rational logic – may override any reports of enemy strengths and confer the feeling that one’s army is so large it cannot possibly be beaten.123 (Prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, President Nasser of Egypt was said to have become ‘intoxicated with the array of men and weapons he saw deployed during his tour of Egyptian positions in the Sinai.’ His growing military over-confidence and attendant bellicosity is thought to have been an important cause of the war).124

This is the key to understanding the effect of positive illusions in modern war. The stimuli that induce or amplify positive illusions might be more or less common to all people facing the threat. But although the stimulus response may help the resolve of a soldier on the battlefield, it may lead a Pentagon planner into serious error. For those in combat, all the traditional advantages of resolve and bluffing will come into play. For other roles, such as military planners, over-confidence will lead to misallocation of resources without any compensating bluff to the enemy – for these roles an accurate assessment would be more beneficial to increase the chance of winning. In this way, a soldier is more like a swimmer, a Pentagon official is more like a golfer.

A key variable that determines whether positive illusions are important or not is the potential for inter-personal communication and signalling with the enemy. If one can only push buttons or pens in response to threat, then positive illusions may not help much – there is little advantage of increased resolve and little opportunity to bluff the opponent. Since war is increasingly run from behind desks, computers and machines, I suspect that positive illusions may be becoming more of a problem than a benefit for the middle-ranking military. However, this same logic regarding the potential for communication means that we ought to expect positive illusions to be especially salient to the most important actors of all – leaders in the highest echelons of political power. Signalling and shows of resolve between political leaders is perhaps one of the quintessential elements of political leadership and international conflict. Moreover, such signalling is crucial in communicating not only to rival nations but to one’s own domestic audience as well. The potential impact and consequences of positive illusions among these actors is therefore highly significant.

So it seems that while positive illusions may bring benefits to soldiers and statesman, they may be a problem for many of the decision-making tiers in between. To zoom back in on the possible proximate mechanism for positive illusions – testosterone – James Dabbs’ research project found that testosterone underlies dominance behaviour ‘either in combative interpersonal encounters,’ such as a soldier would experience, ‘or on the larger public scene,’ as would a politician.125 These professions contrast with more normal circumstances in which, as Dabbs notes, ‘high levels [of testosterone] now conflict with the docility so often needed in modern life.’126

---

123 I am grateful to Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair for raising this point.
126 Ibid., p. 302.
There are a number of ways in which positive illusions among political leaderships may manifest themselves as signals, over and above any conscious element. Conviction and confidence in public speeches, negotiations, political bargaining, forming alliances, seeking treaties, developing large armed forces, projecting military power, and even the right sort of parliamentary fight all represent potential ways in which resolve is signalled. Some of the effects may be already built-in to national institutions and psyche. Positive illusions may, therefore, be of great strategic importance in the political arena – in the short run to counter imminent threats, and in the long run to ensure national interest. This is a striking possibility: Rightly or wrongly, an over-confident disposition among the state leadership may be a significant advantage to national security. It deters aggressors, leads to costly signals of willingness to fight (even if this means fighting and losing some wars), and promotes nationalism. The problem for everyone is that, although exaggerated confidence may improve effectiveness in fighting back in a tough world, today’s massive armies and mighty weapons means that the fighting itself is likely to wreak particular havoc.

POSITIVE ILLUSIONS AMONG GROUPS AND NATIONS

Positive illusions are evident in interactions not only between individuals, but also (and often much more so) among groups, organizations and societies as well. People not only over-estimate themselves, they also over-estimate the groups and societies to which they belong. It has even been discovered that people judge others in their own group as better than the group’s average, even when they are anonymous strangers assigned to their group randomly. Daniel Goleman wrote that:

‘a well-functioning group is bound together by a kind of group narcissism, one that subscribes to the familiar positive illusions: an unrealistically positive sense of itself, the somewhat grandiose sense of how much the group can make a difference – i.e., control circumstances – and an overly optimistic sense that things will turn out well. These positive illusions support a rosy glow about membership in the group, a sense of specialness that is protected by skews in information gathering quite parallel to those that protect the individual self-schema.’

---


Such biases for the in-group and against out-groups follow a deep-rooted paradigm of social psychology known as ‘Social Identity Theory,’ founded on the work of Henri Tajfel and J.C. Turner.¹³⁰ Social Identity Theory builds on a mass of empirical evidence demonstrating that people rapidly identify with even arbitrarily assigned groups, and systematically overvalue their own group’s performance and qualities. Tajfel argued that this results from people’s deep-seated desire to maintain positive self-esteem, and that the most reliable way to do so is for people to invoke inter-group comparisons in an attempt ‘to construe our own in-groups as both different from, and superior to, out-groups of which we are not members. This underlying drive to be different and superior was termed the need for positive distinctiveness.’¹³¹ Experiments have also shown that people over-estimate the ideological difference between their own and an opposing group, and see their opponents’ viewpoints as more extreme than they in fact are.¹³² Social Identity Theory has remained the dominant paradigm in inter-group psychology (the current thrust within the field of political psychology), supported by numerous empirical studies.¹³³ These effects may be especially critical to national groups during war. As Vladimir Volkan argues, ‘anyone trying to deal with interethnic or international conflict must grasp the psychological cogency of man’s need to have enemies as well as allies, and his stubborn adherence to identification with a group when undergoing hardship and danger.’¹³⁴

Group positive illusions appear to be related to group violence. A review of human aggression studies by Roy Baumeister showed that ‘groups whose members demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem also demonstrate higher levels of hostility and violence’ and ‘collective violence tends to be linked to explicit beliefs in the superiority of the violent group.’¹³⁵ This finding concurs with studies on the Mafia and youth gangs, in which lethal violence is exacted upon those who disrespect their supremacy. Another study found that nearly all tyrannies in modern history held strong beliefs in their own cultural superiority (the Nazis being the most obvious example).¹³⁶ There are various reasons to believe that group level positive illusions might be particularly significant in the context of war.¹³⁷

Psychologists Irving Janis and Norman Dixon argued that decision-making within groups is especially likely to exacerbate optimistic biases because ‘groupthink’ results in reinforcing perceptions of superiority including: a shared illusion of invulnerability; collective attempts to maintain shaky but cherished assumptions; an unquestioned belief in the group’s inherent morality; stereotyping the enemy as too evil for negotiation, or too weak to be a threat; a collective illusion of unanimity in a majority viewpoint (based on the faulty assumption that silence means consent); and self-appointed mind guards to protect the group from information that might weaken resolve.\cite{Janis1972}

Karen Alter recently claimed to have identified all six criteria in George W. Bush administration’s assessments of Iraq before the 2003 war.\cite{Alter2002} Groupthink and positive illusions would reinforce each other dramatically. As Daniel Goleman noted, the groupthink bias of invulnerability, ‘the sense that whatever the group plans is bound to succeed,’ is ‘an illusion that is virtually the sum total of the three positive illusions that Taylor describes for the individual.’\cite{Goleman1989}

The impact of positive illusions on individuals and groups may be compounded at the society level too, a feature I turn to next. Positive illusions at the society level appear to be particularly important in understanding war. Long ago, another psychologist, Norman Meier noted that ‘intensive nationalism, like excessive egotism, is inclined to lead toward attitudes of superiority, with corresponding ratings of inferiority for others … Most nations, being composed of fallible human beings, are guilty of some degree of this self-delusion.’\cite{Meier1943}

Decades of research has corroborated this unfortunate but robust result. Whole societies are likely to succumb to mutually reinforced positive illusions because of inherent differences in feedback from ‘in-group’ versus ‘out-group’ interactions. Within societies, inaccuracies about other people are limited by overlapping interests, and by continuous interaction and corrective information. Between societies, however, views of self-enhancement receive little (or at least less) informational feedback from each other. That is, misconceptions are challenged much less frequently, and are often exacerbated by different ideologies and values among those societies. Similarly, negative views about outsiders’ moral worth, physical strength and bravery remain unchecked by feedback or shared interest. These result in systematically lower assessments of other groups. Conflict is therefore more likely, because both sides hold constantly reinforced positive illusions of their own society’s virtues and the perception that they wield superior morals, gods, national aspirations, or soldiers.\cite{VanEvera2000}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Janis1972} Janis, I.L. (1972) \textit{Victims of Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes} Houghton Mifflin, Boston; Dixon, N. (1976) \textit{On the Psychology of Military Incompetence} Jonathan Cape, London. Paul t’Hart has reassessed the groupthink phenomenon, and warns that while it can indeed spawn over optimism, this occurs when the decision is seen as a potential opportunity. If the decision is already seen as very risky, then groupthink may result in collective avoidance. So it may not have a systematic influence on war. t’Hart, P. (1990) \textit{Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure} Swets and Zeitlinger, Amsterdam.
\bibitem{Alter2002} Alter, K.J. (21 September 2002) 'Is 'Groupthink' Driving Us to War?' \textit{The Boston Globe}.
\end{thebibliography}
systematically reinforced by ‘chauvinist mythmaking,’ a ‘hallmark of nationalism’ which includes ‘self-glorifying, self-whitewashing and other-maligning’ via school curricula, popular history, literature and the political elite.\textsuperscript{143}

An example is the British complacency about Japanese capabilities before the invasion of Malaysia during the Second World War. Defences were left to the last minute, at least partly because senior commanders held the belief that Japanese soldiers were small, physically weak, had poor eyesight, suffered from inferior leadership, and could not drive armour through the jungle. Of course, all this was quickly found to be false.\textsuperscript{144}

Times of crisis significantly exacerbate the process of in-group positive illusions and out-group derogation. Lawrence LeShan describes ‘a strong tendency in us humans to shift our method of appraising an international situation from a sensory reality to a mythic reality as tensions escalate.’\textsuperscript{145} He distinguishes ‘sensory realities,’ which prevail during peacetime, from ‘mythic realities,’ which take over in times of threat. The mythic perception of events is buoyed by numerous biased but common perceptions: A reduction to an ‘us and them’ or ‘good and evil’ mentality; a devaluation of the enemy; a belief that ‘our’ allies are virtuous, ‘theirs’ are immoral; that God is on ‘our’ side; that winning becomes crucial and losing unthinkable; that the enemy acts for evil motives whereas ‘we’ are fighting out of self-defence, benevolence, or morality; contrary opinions are suppressed and those who question accepted wisdom are branded as unpatriotic or traitors; concerns for underlying causes fade against the importance of outcomes; the enemy is prone to lying so communication is pointless; identical acts are good when done by ‘us,’ but evil when done by ‘them.’ Though a cliché, it is nevertheless a well-supported phenomenon that, in general, and try as we might, people tend to fail to understand the psychology of someone in another role or situation.\textsuperscript{146} As LeShan suggests, the ‘mythic evaluation of reality’ may be the most effective way to fight a war once it is happening, ‘but the decision of whether to fight a war should be made in the sensory reality, without the contamination of mythical elements.’\textsuperscript{147}

**EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE ILLUSIONS IN WAR**

It has long been argued that ‘although war can occur even when both sides see each other accurately, misperception often plays a large role.’\textsuperscript{148} Indeed, misperception has dominated theorizing on international crises and the causes of war. Positive illusions may account for many such misperceptions, why they tend to be in a positive direction, and why they provoke war. As Richard Lebow noted: ‘Leaders who entertain expectations of easy victory may be willing to

---


assume greater risks because the prospect of war exercises less of a restraining influence upon them. They may also conclude that the probability of war is low because they expect their adversaries to back away from a test of arms rather than face certain defeat."149

In this section, I present some illustrative examples of international events in which behaviour consistent with positive illusions appears to have been a factor contributing to war. These are just tasters to prime the transition from the theoretical discussion of this chapter to war in the real world. Detailed case studies of other wars and crises follow in chapters 4 – 7. The brief examples here highlight the problem of potentially confounding historical and cultural factors. However, they also suggest that decision-makers hold biases towards over-confident assessments that are consistent with the positive illusions hypothesis. In each case, I urge the reader to remember that I am not arguing that positive illusions are the all-encompassing explanation for war. Rather, that they offer an extra piece of the war puzzle.

According to Richard Lebow, the 1904 Russo-Japanese war is a striking example ‘of the effects of unwarranted military confidence upon crisis decision-making … The magnitude of Russia’s defeat stood in sharp contrast to her leaders’ expectations of victory. From the onset of the crisis the Russians were so certain of their superiority that they were convinced that Japan would never actually risk a test of arms.150 If it should come to war, however, decision-makers maintained ‘racist delusions of superiority’ and both the Russian army and navy were sure of an easy victory. The Japanese forces was labelled ‘an army of ducklings’ which ‘could not be compared to any major European army, least of all the Russian.’ One senior member of the Russian General Staff declared ‘we will only have to throw our caps at them and they will run away.’ But it was not just a deluded few who held this view. A significant faction of the Russian government and advisers were confident they could defeat the Japanese, even without any help from allies, and even though the Japanese had a superior navy and an army that outnumbered the Russian army of the Far East by 330,000 to 100,000. Gordon Martel similarly noted that the war partly resulted from Russian leaders’ ‘misplaced confidence in her strength in the far east.’151 James Fearon noted that, while ‘on the eve of the war, Russian leaders believed that their military could almost certainly defeat Japan,’ on the other side, the Japanese chief of staff ‘estimated a fifty-fifty chance of prevailing, if their attack began immediately. Thus Japanese and Russian leaders disagreed about relative power – their estimates of the likelihood of victory summed to greater than 1. Moreover, historical accounts implicate this disagreement as a major cause of the war.’152

After his long study of India and Pakistan, Sumit Ganguly concluded that over-optimism has been a root cause of the wars between them. Although differing ideologies and Pakistan’s claims to Kashmir may explain the underlying hostility, they fail to explain the outbreak of the four Indo-Pakistan wars. Ganguly favours the explanation that the wars were sparked by perceived windows of opportunity ‘augmented by false optimism, which in the Indo-Pakistani conflicts falls into three categories: the misreading of an opponent’s (a) relative military strength, (b) relative will, and (c)

150 Ibid., p. 244-246.
allies, and their number, power and will."\(^{153}\) On numerous occasions, but particularly in the wars of 1947-48, 1965, and 1999, Pakistani decision-makers grossly underestimated Indian military prowess and likely Indian responses to military challenges ... The anti-Indian and chauvinistic ideology of the authoritarian Pakistani state repeatedly contributed to a flawed assessment of India’s military capabilities and will.’ A powerful jingoism was evident on the side of India as well, but over-confidence was apparently constrained to some extent by open and democratic debate within the decision-making elite and public as a whole.

Max Hastings wrote in *The Korean War* that ‘At the root of American action lay a contempt, conscious or unconscious, for the capabilities of Mao Tse-tsong’s nation and armed forces.’\(^{154}\) U.S. decision-makers suffered from a ‘complacency engendered by racial stereotypes of the enemy.’\(^{155}\) The American commander General MacArthur appeared to be particularly subject to positive estimates of his own capabilities relative to those of the enemy, and he strongly influenced the decision to send troops on the basis of a ‘bold but unrealistic assessment.’\(^{156}\) The massive amphibious landings an Inchon were considered something of a masterpiece of daring and brilliance, sweeping behind and trapping the North Korean army. But as the war progressed he ultimately paid a price for his great confidence and low regard for the ‘oriental military ability.’\(^{157}\) The Chinese had made clear their intention to intervene if the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel. Many U.S. decision-makers under-estimated this possibility, especially MacArthur, who ‘repeatedly and cavalierly dismissed Peking’s ability to organize and coordinate an offensive in Korea.’\(^{158}\) He told President Truman at their mid-war meeting on Wake Island in the Pacific that even ‘in the unlikely event of the Chinese intervening, his air force would commit “the greatest slaughter”.’\(^{159}\) If they did intervene, MacArthur claimed that any Russian support would be useless as ‘their incompetence would cause them to “bomb the Chinese as often as they would bomb us”.’\(^{160}\) As we now know, in November 1951, 180,000 Chinese soldiers attacked the coalition forces as they approached the Yalu River and ultimately drove them all the way back to the 38th Parallel. The result (apart from the deaths of 450,000 South Koreans, 33,000 Americans, 3,000 allies from other nations, and around 1.5 million North Koreans and Chinese), was an armistice simply re-establishing the approximate pre-war borders. As Saul David put it: ‘Such an outcome could have been achieved before Christmas 1950 if MacArthur and the U.S. government had not been so ready to underestimate the political will and fighting capability of the Chinese.’\(^{161}\)

Positive illusions were also evident prior to the 1973 Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War. One author concluded that ‘at every level Israel underestimated her enemy.’\(^{162}\) I already mentioned


\(^{157}\) Ibid., p. 246.


\(^{159}\) Ibid., p. 272.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., p. 278.

Israeli Chief of Staff David Elazar’s comment, just ten days before the war, that ‘we’ll have one hundred tanks against their eight hundred ... That ought to be enough.’ Israeli combat superiority was indeed higher than their enemies according to later quantitative analyses, but even then by a factor of two, not eight. Baylis Thomas wrote of ‘Israel’s complacency about its invincibility and a certain racist assumption about the inferiority of Arab soldiers.’ On the other side, there have been some interesting statements made about Arab self-confidence. T.H. Dupuy, who conducted numerous historical studies of military effectiveness, wrote that there was ‘an Arab cultural tendency to allow emotion and wishful thinking to influence planning, evaluation and operational leadership.’ According to one Palestinian Arab, ‘We are emotional rather than coldly analytical. Honour is exaggerated at the expense of real need. We would like to see certain things and we think they are.’ Dupuy reports that an Egyptian general also identified this tendency ‘in almost identical words.’ Leaving these anecdotal impressions aside, the facts themselves imply that Egyptian leaders certainly had remarkable confidence that its (even limited) war aims were possible because ‘for Egypt to cross the Suez Canal to establish a beachhead on the east bank was considered impossible by all military observers.’

I do not suggest that positive illusions necessarily affected the progress of the wars mentioned here, but they may have played a part in the decision, by both sides, that they should be fought.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a swelling tide of theory and empirical evidence (from both experimental and real world studies) that psychological biases are crucial to understanding international relations. What is not so common is to ask the question of the origins of the various biases found by psychologists. We often know that they do occur from experiments and case studies. But we don’t often know why. Theories that include a hypothesized origin for psychological biases permit an understanding of what differs between the human past and the present, and therefore what leads them to cause disasters today. Positive illusions are an example of a well-documented empirical phenomenon that,
at the same time, has a well-developed and intuitive theory for their biological origin and adaptive function.

Numerous cases of ill-fated optimism can be easily unearthed if one reads enough history books. Of course, one can also find examples of remarkably accurate assessments, or even over-pessimism. Yet, historians and political scientists have tended to note that it is in particular misperceptions in a positive direction – over-optimism and over-confidence – that is associated with the outbreak of war. This thesis outlines one reason why this may occur: Namely, that positive illusions tend to make people over-estimate themselves and under-estimate the enemy, exaggerate their control over events, and hold unrealistic expectations about the future. Kenneth Waltz rejected human nature as a cause of war because it has traditionally been seen to be a constant, whereas war is not. However, the claim that human nature and its effects are fixed is not valid. Human behavioural traits vary widely along at least two dimensions: First, they vary among individuals, and secondly, they are differentially triggered depending on a number of contextual factors. So they need not be fixed at all. As psychologists caution, ‘psychological phenomena should be studied at both the aggregate level (situational main effects) and at the individual level (stable individual differences).’ Positive illusions specifically are known to vary among people and among contexts (these sources of variation are discussed in detail in Chapter 3). Indeed, in Shelley Taylor and David Armor’s words: ‘situational factors can greatly enhance or virtually obliterate their existence.’ This thesis will argue that, though positive illusions simmer at a fundamental base-level in human psychology, sometimes circumstances conspire to let them run rampant and make war, while at other times they are suppressed and foster peace.

Ignoring the potential impact of positive illusions in military or political contexts may be a dangerous oversight. They are a widespread phenomenon in numerous other contexts and, if anything, are likely to be exacerbated in the fog of crisis and war. Ambiguity tends to breed false perceptions, corroborate existing ones, and reduce the amount or perceived utility of feedback. Barbara Tuchman has argued that governments, trade unions and businesses are all prone to over-estimating their capabilities, where ‘the exercise of judgement acting on experience, common sense and available information is less operative and more frustrated than it should be.’ Positive illusions are, in contrast to many other theories about the origins of biased military judgement, consistent with the incidence of over-confidence among different professions, eras and types of people.

The ubiquity of positive illusions in sport is particularly instructive. Competitors are often confident of an impending success and this can actually enhance their performance. Part of this is a deliberate show of resolve to consciously bolster team confidence. But in many cases it is clear that competitors on both sides really believed that they would win. It is a rarely violated fact that people systematically believe it is their own team that will win (even among spectators). If people were unbiased, only 50% of them would think so even when the stakes were equal. Some or all of them are therefore apparently subject to positive illusions, which may be positive in effect, if illusive in reality.

The existence of competition at all relies on uncertainty in success. A similar line of argument is relevant for understanding war. Wars also rely on uncertainty in success (otherwise they would rarely occur) and for war to initiate, both sides generally need to hold a belief that they will gain from them (regardless of how easy they think actually winning may be). It would be strategic to expose this confident belief whether or not it is true, and to hide any evidence to the contrary. Consequently, James Fearon argued that ‘the cause of war cannot be simply lack of information, but whatever it is that prevents its disclosure.’ According to him, the central cause of war within the rational choice framework is that leaders have private information about one’s own capabilities, plus ‘an incentive to exaggerate their true willingness or capability to fight.’ Fearon suggests that this process is consciously enacted by state leaderships (and reinforced by institutional practices). The positive illusions hypothesis is rather similar, and not mutually exclusive. It suggests that precisely the same strategic advantage – the incentive to exaggerate one’s true willingness or capability to fight – has selected for a sub-conscious psychological bias towards concealing true capabilities and feigning confidence. Therefore, over-confidence may result from both conscious strategy (sensu Fearon) and/or sub-conscious strategy (sensu positive illusions). Secrecy and confidence bolstering may be expected from both sources. However, Fearon’s rational choice origin is problematic for three reasons. In explaining war, he concluded that:

‘It could be that the states have conflicting estimates of the likelihood of victory, and if both sides are optimistic about their chances this can obscure the bargaining range. But even if the states have private and conflicting estimates of what would happen in a war, if they are rational, they should know that there can only be one true probability that one or the other will prevail.’

First, there is no reason to expect even rational actors to arrive at the same conclusions with the same information. Rational actors, even when they are experts in their field, often come up with

178 Ibid., p. 391.
179 Ibid., p. 395. His two other conditions for war within the rationalist framework are ‘commitment problems,’ in which a state cannot convince another of how it will behave in the future, and ‘indivisible issues,’ in which the object of contention cannot be divided between them. See also Hinde, R.A. (1993) ‘Aggression and War: Individuals, Groups and States’ In Behaviour, Society and International Conflict, (Eds, Tetlock, P.E., J.L. Husbands and R. Jervis) Oxford University Press, Oxford.
diametrically opposing views of who will win. To illustrate this point, Jonathon Kirshner showed that over three years of data on American Football matches, six neutral experts disagreed on who would win 74% of the time. As he points out, such disagreement is much more likely in predicting the outcomes of war, given the complexity of such events and the abundance of factors that one can use to judge them.\(^\text{181}\)

Second, John Garofano argues that the rationalist emphasis on private information ‘seems suspect’ because ‘symmetry or asymmetry in available information may be irrelevant for leaderships who understand that strategy, mobilization, organizational effectiveness, the introduction of new technologies, and other factors may decisively affect the outcome of certain kinds of war. The greater the unknowns in war, and the more adaptable the governments, the less meaningful is hard information.’\(^\text{182}\) In other words, even if both sides had all the information possible, it is the way of war, not just the order of battle, by which states estimate their chance of winning. It is therefore possible for even rational actors to remain overly optimistic.

Finally, Fearon’s argument (and the whole rational choice framework) rests on the assumption that human brains and states are rational calculators, which are expected to accurately weigh up and compare the combined probabilities and utilities of all possible options. But it is increasingly hard to accept the assumption of rational choice as a realistic model of human behaviour. I am writing at a time when rational choice theory has been significantly challenged, because human behaviour is well established to deviate in systematic ways from its predictions (people regularly do not choose the options that would maximize their material gains over time).\(^\text{183}\) Actual responses appear to originate from some combination of cognitive calculation plus biases and emotions with ancient origins that seat them deep in the brain. Scholars from at least four different disciplines are converging on the conclusion that evolutionary biology is essential to understand observed human behaviour, as opposed to that predicted by rational choice theory. Indeed, without emotions, peoples’ decision-making is significantly impaired. A number of researchers, including Antonio Damasio (a neurologist), Robert Frank (an economist), Robert Trivers (an evolutionary biologist) and Jerome Kagan (a psychologist) have arrived at the same conclusion from a variety of different methods and evidence.\(^\text{184}\)

In summary then, Fearon’s intuition about the strategic incentive to exaggerate one’s true willingness or capability to fight seems to be correct. But it may come from evolutionary mechanisms such as positive illusions rather than solely from conscious strategizing. Moreover, we have seen how positive illusions may manifest themselves not only the individual level, but also at the group and society level as well. In his conclusions Fearon acknowledged that ‘a better understanding of what the assumption of rationality really implies for explaining war may actually


Certain manifestations of positive illusions might be dangerous enough as it is. But they are likely to magnify conflict even further because of cruel interactions with other phenomena. For example, unrealistic optimism may often fail to be updated at all due to other processes, such as denial, cognitive dissonance, or institutional biases that avoid self-evaluation.\footnote{Van Evera, S. (Forthcoming), see http://web.mit.edu/afs/athena.mit.edu/org/p/polisci/faculty/S.VanEvera.html.} Robert Jervis highlights other calamitous trends: ‘On balance, it seems that states are more likely to overestimate the hostility of others than to underestimate it,’ and ‘states tend to infer threatening motives from actions that a disinterested observer would record as at least partly cooperative’ (similar biases have been recorded in bargaining behaviour).\footnote{Jervis, R. (1988) ‘War and Misperception’ \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 18: 675-700p. 688-690; Bazerman, M.H., J.R. Curhan, D.A. Moore, \textit{et al.} (2000) ‘Negotiation’ \textit{Annual Review of Psychology} 51: 279-314} These biases ‘often operate simultaneously, with the result that both sides are likely to believe that they are cooperating and that others are responding with hostility.’ Furthermore, people tend to attribute failure in cooperative tasks to other parties, not to themselves, and more so to those they do not know well.\footnote{Sedikides, C., W.K. Campbell, G.D. Reeder, \textit{et al.} (1998) ‘The Self-Serving Bias in Relational Context’ \textit{Journal of Personality and Social Psychology} 74: 378-386.} Add to this the tendency via positive illusions to believe that one is superior to a rival, and one has a veritable witches brew for violence.

In the 18\textsuperscript{th} century Samuel Johnson considered the relationship between confidence and war and concluded that ‘mutual cowardice keeps us in peace.’ His explanation was that:

‘Were one half of mankind brave and one half cowards, the brave would be always beating the cowards. Were all brave, they would lead a very uneasy life; and would be continually fighting: but being all cowards, we go on very well.’\footnote{Boswell, J. (1791) \textit{Life of Samuel Johnson} Penguin, London, 28 April 1778.}

Unfortunately, it seems that Samuel Johnson was wrong about people being cowards. The world from London in 1778 may have seemed relatively peaceful, but Europe and many other parts of the world have been ravaged by war for much of the time long before and ever since then. Feeding this larger data set into Johnson’s own logic predicts the opposite about human nature – instead, people are commonly too brave. Political scientists and historians have been very successful at identifying numerous underlying causes and incentives that lay the potential for war, but perhaps it is our positive illusions and all too human over-confidence that renders us so willing to fight them. This thesis intends to find out.
Chapter III

Looking for Illusions

The search for immutable principles of war ... leads to a reckless ransacking of history for evidence to support a priori positions.

Cohen and Gooch ¹

To concentrate on a few cases of ‘decision making’ – an approach often followed by political scientists – is to distort reality ... 90 percent (at least) of good command consists of things that never happen.

Martin Van Creveld ²

This chapter breaks down the positive illusions theory of war into its component parts to expose the hypotheses and predictions I test in the case studies (general readers should feel free to skip ahead to the case studies). My central hypothesis is that positive illusions in the decision-making units of states increase the chance of war initiation. Of course, there is a plethora of alternative (and not mutually exclusive) explanations for why and when wars occur. Positive illusions are proposed to explain some of the variance in why states go to war, and to act in addition to, not instead of existing theories.³

The most important point is that positive illusions vary: First, positive illusions are greater when assessments are less verifiable, less specific, unlikely to provide feedback, ambiguous,

under implementation, or are made in threatening circumstances. Second, I further hypothesise that the effects of positive illusions – the over-confidence that they engender – are greater in non-democratic states and in closed decision-making processes (both of which alter the degree to which positive illusions ultimately impact on policy outcomes). Positive illusions are predicted to be least likely to produce war in democratic governments with an open debate, and most likely to produce war in non-democracies with a closed debate. This will be tested among my four case studies. The case studies represent crises that both did and did not develop into wars, in order to test the counter-hypothesis that an absence of positive illusions tends to favour the avoidance of war.

I establish three conditions required for a valid test of positive illusions: First, that decision-makers had sufficient time to assess each others motivations and capabilities (precluding the hypothesis that decisions and were not properly considered and just represented a ‘knee-jerk’ reaction). Second, that alternative options were available (precluding the hypothesis that decisions represented the only course of action). Third, that available information, though always imperfect, was sufficient to appreciate the general asymmetries (precluding the hypothesis that decisions were simply good ones, given poor information).

Evidence for positive illusions is based on four types of data: First, over-confidence as judged by other actors at the time, and by what historians and political scientists have concluded should have been clear at the time (i.e. controlling for the benefit of hindsight). Second, statements by decision-makers that express over-confident beliefs (ideally in private, not public, since the latter may partly be propaganda). Third, facts that betray over-confident beliefs (e.g. actual policies, decisions, commitments, or actions). Fourth, a comparison of expectations to actual outcomes.

**THE POSITIVE ILLUSIONS THEORY OF WAR**

I hypothesize that positive illusions in the decision-making units of states increases the chance of war initiation. This can be broken down into component parts to give a more precise theory (see Figure 3.1) and more precise predictions (see Table 3.1). The ‘prime hypothesis’ is that war is more likely when decision-makers have positive illusions. But this omits the chain of events that leads from individuals harbouring positive illusions to the complex outcome of inter-state war. This chain of events is detailed in the ‘explanatory hypothesis,’ which proposes that, given certain antecedent conditions, positive illusions cause various types of over-confidence among decision-makers. In turn, over-confidence, given further antecedent conditions, causes war.

The antecedent conditions are crucial because, given that war is a sporadic event, only a causal factor that is variable has the potential to explain why it occurs at some times and not at others. Due to the importance of this, the sources of variation in positive illusions are described in detail in the next section.

---

4 I define ‘decision-making units’ to mean the leader or the committee that make policy decisions, and ‘states’ as the entity from within which these decisions are made in international politics.
Figure 3.1 The positive illusions theory. Positive illusions, given certain antecedent conditions (a relationship denoted by the symbol ‘X’), engender four main ‘intervening phenomena’ of over-confidence in state decision-making. These manifestations of over-confidence, given further antecedent conditions, may provoke war (i.e. increasing the probability of war over and above any underlying rationale or motive for a particular war).
Table 3.1. Specific hypotheses and predictions of the positive illusions theory. The main hypotheses (A1 – A3) describe the basic theory. The explanatory hypotheses (B1 – B4) describe the 4 types of over-confidence hypothesized to be caused by positive illusions and used as the operational predictions actually tested in the case studies. Predictions for the six antecedent conditions for positive illusions (C1 – C6) and the two for over-confidence (D1 – D2) are given in separate tables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Main hypotheses</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Positive illusions provoke war (Prime Hypothesis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Positive illusions increase over-confidence (Explanatory Hypothesis A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Over-confidence provoke war (Explanatory Hypothesis B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Intervening phenomena</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Over-estimation of own side (and allies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Under-estimation of enemy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Neglect of intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>Sum of opponents’ winning estimates $&gt; 1^*$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For example, both sides might believe they have a 50% chance of winning, or one side belives it has an 80% chance and the other side a 40% chance (one can still have over-confident expectations even if one appreciates it is not the strongest side).
Sources of Variation in Positive Illusions

Positive Illusions vary among individual people and among contexts. They also appear to vary among mental states, gender, cultures and professions, but more weakly and speculatively, so I restrict discussion of those potential additional sources of variation to the end of the thesis. Behavioural explanations of war are often ignored in international relations scholarship because human nature has traditionally been seen to be a constant, while war is not. Ergo, the former is held not to be able to explain the latter. But this view is outdated, and was wrong at the time. As David Welch was moved to remark, ‘to read the classic texts of international relations theory, one would never suspect that human beings have right brains as well as left; that in addition to being selfish, they also love, hate, hope, and despair; that they sometimes act not out of interest, but out of courage, politeness, or rage.’ Traits that comprise human nature (e.g. anger) vary enormously among individuals (different people express different amounts and manifestations of anger) and among contexts (anger is differentially triggered and/or restrained depending on the situation). We do not expect some rigid behavioural ‘trait’ to explain diverse political phenomena; but the variable ‘state’ of a trait may indeed, among other things, co-vary with variation in political phenomena, offering a potential causal explanation. In his review of research on optimism, Christopher Peterson warned that we ‘should not become so focused on optimism as a psychological characteristic that it ignores how it is influenced by external situations.’ Certainly, existing research shows that there are specific antecedent conditions that alter the strength of positive illusions (see Figure 3.1), which I outline below in a moment.

Even if these sources of variation were absent, however, any trait of ‘human nature’ can have different political outcomes depending on the different environment within which it is expressed. For example, anger could cause immediate policy outcomes for Alexander the Great (such as razing a town to the ground), but there are numerous mechanisms to temper an angry American President. Thus, the same traits in two different governments may have entirely different policy outcomes once squeezed through the local machinery of decision-making and approval. Therefore, there are also antecedent ‘structural’ conditions that alter the impact of positive illusions on policy, or more specifically on the forms of over-confidence it engenders (as in Figure 3.1). Below, I outline two such conditions, ‘regime type’ and ‘openness of debate.’

Positive illusions are ‘likely to vary as a function of the person, the situation, and their interaction.’ I am hypothesizing, therefore, that variation in positive illusions themselves, plus any variation imposed by the structures through which positive illusions are expressed, is

---

6 See, for example Waltz, K.N. (1959) Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis Columbia University Press, New York; this was also the view of Morgenthau, H. (1956) Politics among Nations Alfred Knopf, New York.
expected to correlate positively with the probability of war. Of course, there is some probability of war even if there are no positive illusions (due to a variety of alternative causes). But above whatever that value is, increasing positive illusions nevertheless increase the probability of war still further, adding additional explanatory power to understand the outbreak of wars.

**Individual Variation in Positive Illusions**

Individual variation in positive illusions is fully expected. ‘Our human nature provides a baseline optimism, of which individuals show more versus less,’ due to, for example, variation in self-esteem or our experiences, which influence the degree to which we are optimistic.\(^{11}\) Given individual variation in optimism, we might expect a normal (i.e. bell-curved) distribution of positive illusions in a population, just as people’s heights or IQs follow a normal distribution (see Figure 3.2). As Lionel Tiger wrote in his book on the adaptive importance of optimism, ‘in dealing with natural systems the shortest analytical distance between two points is a normal curve.’\(^{12}\) This curve is useful because, as well as illustrating the empirical phenomenon that the average person exceeds realistic assessments, it also highlights the point that many people will exceed the average, and some by a lot.

At the end of the thesis I will argue that people at the high end of this distribution are particularly likely to be over represented among leaders and decision-makers. Furthermore, people at the extreme end of the distribution are likely to be over represented among those often-infamous figures whose confidence was so extreme that it ultimately brought their own demise – the Napoleons, Hitlers and Saddam Husseins of history. For the purposes of the case studies, it is enough to bear in mind that individuals vary in positive illusions so we do not expect all leaders to exhibit them in the same way.

---


Figure 3.2 Conceptual scheme of how positive illusions vary among the population at large. While the precise distribution may be somewhat skewed (such that one side is more bunched up and the other side has a long tail), the general point stands: There are relative differences in positive illusions among different types of people. Empirically, we know that the majority of people tend to over-estimate their capabilities, their control over events, and the future. Hence, the actual population average exceeds realistic assessment of these things, men slightly more, women slight less so. Leaders may be over-represented by people at the high end of the distribution due to self-selection, and selection effects within their institutions. At the extreme are the overzealous warlords of history, whose boundless over-confidence ultimately brought their own ruin. At the lower extreme are people suffering from depression, who rarely have any positive illusions. These different types of people are discussed more fully in Chapter 8.
Contextual Variation (or ‘Antecedent Conditions’) in Positive Illusions

Although self-enhancement is characteristic of most people, it ‘ebbs and flows as a function of situational constraints … positive illusions are most evident in the abstract when they hold the power to inspire and motivate but are less in evidence when they can be directly disconfirmed by the feedback of specific situations.’\textsuperscript{13} By this logic, we may expect positive illusions to be particularly prevalent, even amplified, in the run up to war, but then to decline with feedback on the war’s various costs. We can say more than this, however, because there are more precise predictions about when positive illusions will be more or less likely:

‘…self-enhancing illusions are situationally responsive. Specifically, positive illusions are lessened as verifiability increases. Consistent with this point is evidence that positive illusions are more evident at the general than at the specific level, more in evidence at the beginning of a project than the end of a project, more in evidence with respect to ambiguous personal qualities than with respect to concrete personal qualities with clear behavioural referents, and more in evidence when a course of action has been selected than when it is under debate.’\textsuperscript{14}

These antecedent conditions alter the magnitude of positive illusions (summarized in Table 3.2, and explained in Appendix 3.1). Positive illusions are greater when they are less verifiable, less specific, unlikely to provide feedback, ambiguous, under implementation, and made in threatening circumstances. If these variables are at the high end, positive illusions are expected to have a larger effect on war.


Table 3.2 Predicted levels of positive illusions as a function of six antecedent conditions: Verifiability, generality, feedback, ambiguity, stage of task, and threat level. Each is described in detail in Appendix 3.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Expected level of positive illusions</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verifiability</td>
<td>High verifiability</td>
<td>Low verifiability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>Specific level</td>
<td>General/abstract level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>End of period</td>
<td>Beginning of period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity</td>
<td>Clear qualities</td>
<td>Ambiguous qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage of task</td>
<td>When deliberating</td>
<td>When planning or implementing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat level</td>
<td>No danger</td>
<td>Danger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contextual Variation (or ‘Antecedent Conditions’) in Over-confidence

The above section outlined the antecedent conditions under which positive illusions are likely to be pronounced. In this section I propose antecedent conditions that account for variation in when the consequences of those positive illusions – over-confidence in decision-making – lead to war and when they do not. Over-confidence is the ‘intervening variable’ that I propose lies between positive illusions and war. This variable incorporates four main ‘intervening phenomena’ - over-estimation of one’s own side (and allies); under-estimation of enemies (and allies); neglect of intelligence; and both sides’ estimates of winning probability summing to greater than 1 (see Figure 3.1). Positive illusions may not necessarily be expected to cause war on their own (although there is little reason to suppose they would not), but these various forms of over-confidence they engender are predicted to make war more likely – providing, that is, that they can skip corrective assessment before influencing policy.

Over-confidence has several possible origins, as I highlighted in Chapter 1. However, positive illusions can be distinguished from other sources of over-confidence (such as learning, cognitive dissonance etc.) in three ways. Firstly, positive illusions manifest specific traits (over-estimation of oneself compared to others, illusions of control over events, and over-optimistic expectations of the future). Secondly, the six antecedent conditions of positive illusions (described in the section above), together form a unique suite of factors that other sources of over-confidence do not match. Thirdly, positive illusions predict a systematically positive bias, whereas other types of misperceptions sometimes may lead to over-confidence but at other times lead to a negative bias instead. These features suggest that positive illusions are uniquely identifiable and may be particularly associated with war and conflict.

Even if over-confidence was a fixed feature among all people (it is not, but even if it was), the structure from within which decision-makers (or the decision-making group) operate will influence the degree to which such biases are translated into policy outcomes. I suggest that the two key variables that alter this are ‘regime type’ (which represents the official checks and balances on decision-making, which vary among states and are better in democracies) and ‘openness of debate’ (which represents the unofficial checks and balances imposed by leaders and institutions on decision-making, which vary among cases and are better when more open). The details of how these variables affect over-confidence are explored in Appendix 3.2. Regardless of initial levels of positive illusions ‘fed into the system’ from people’s initial bias, different combinations of these two variables will vary the predicted risk of war depending on how much over-confidence survives to come out of the system at the other end – the policy end. Both variables provide predictions that can be tested in the case studies (see Table 3.3).
Table 3.3 Predictions for levels of over-confidence as a function of two antecedent conditions: Regime type and openness of debate. Each is described in Appendix 3.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1 More democratic regimes are more likely to identify and reduce over-confidence</td>
<td>Over-confidence is reduced in more democratic regimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2 More open debate is more likely to identify and reduce over-confidence</td>
<td>Over-confidence is reduced when debate is more open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TESTING THE THEORY

In this thesis, I study two wars and two crises: The First World War, the Vietnam War, the Munich Crisis of 1938, and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (see Table 3.4). The quotes at the beginning of this Chapter illustrate the potential danger of using case studies to test theories because of a priori selection criteria and small sample sizes, but they also offer many advantages in seeking more explicit and detailed causal processes (see Appendix 3.3 for the advantages of this method and my case selection criteria). Appendix 3.4 sets out the details of the specific methodology I attempted to use in the case study analyses (controlled comparisons, congruence analyses, and process tracing), and explains which data from the case studies were available and/or appropriate to employ in the application of each method.
Table 3.4 Case studies separated by regime type and openness of debate (the two antecedent conditions hypothesized to act on over-confidence). Note that, although the level of positive illusions before and during each event are predicted to vary among cases, if they are a powerful phenomenon in international relations then they could be evident in any of the cases – even where they are least expected to provide any additional explanatory power. For further details see Chapter 3, and for selection criteria see Appendix 3.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicted level of positive illusions</th>
<th>Open</th>
<th>Closed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Non-Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wars</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WW I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Triple Entente)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam (US)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam (North Vietnam)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munich Crisis (Allies)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban Missile Crisis (US)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munich Crisis (Hitler)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban Missile Crisis (USSR)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why Examine Crises in a Thesis about War?

Focusing solely on cases of wars would be unrepresentative of international relations in general. States often find themselves on the brink of war, but then manage to find a way to avoid it. Any sample of war data can therefore be argued to be biased *a priori*, if wars systematically represent events characterised by bellicosity and bullishness.\(^5\) If that is true, then there is a danger of looking for evidence of factors promoting war *within* the very sample of situations that they are hypothesised to account for. It is then not possible to falsify the reverse claim that wars are avoided if decision-makers do *not* have positive illusions. In order to resolve this potential bias, I analyse crises as well as wars, which, although hypothesised to occur in the first place because of positive illusions, allows a test of whether a *reduction* of positive illusions contributed to their peaceful resolution (instead of war).\(^6\) Crises provide particularly good tests because they are situations when war could break out easily, i.e. avoidance of war in a crisis is more telling than avoidance of war during times of peace. With respect to positive illusions, crises are of especial interest because these events force an urgent reassessment of one’s interests, of the relative capabilities of the two sides, and the probability of winning or gaining from any impending conflict.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE CASE STUDIES

Elimination of Alternative Explanations

For each case, I initially ensure that three alternative explanations for the decisions taken can be rejected. These alternative explanations offer hypotheses that, if true, would render my theory (or any other theory) unnecessary, since there would be no need for additional explanatory power. They are not competing theories as such; rather, they suggest that the spark for war or crisis occurred as a result of fundamental constraints on available time, available options or available information. Each is considered here in turn:

---

\(^5\) This is, of course, an overly strict criticism given that my theory specifically identifies variables that are expected to alter the degree of positive illusions.

\(^6\) Crises may be biased in the same way (states normally do not get into either wars or crises). However, the theory predicts that positive illusions play a *greater* role in situations that did develop into war, than those that did not. A logical next step would be to look for an absence of positive illusions in ‘non-event’ data (i.e. times of peace where nothing happened). While an interesting possibility for future studies, this has methodological problems. For instance, against whom does one not have positive illusions? What time period does one study that is representative? See Achen, C. and D. Snidal (1989) ‘Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies’ *World Politics* 41: 143-169.
Insufficient Time for Assessment?

For each case, I ascertain that the time for assessment was long enough to eliminate the possibility that decisions were simply based on ‘knee-jerk’ reactions. Wars may be fought because decision-makers do not have enough time to adequately assess their options, and war simply seems the best ‘reflex’ option at the time. Apparently over-optimistic decisions may then just represent imperfect decision-making rather than over-optimism per se. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wrote that, in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, ‘we often did not have time to think straight.’ He noted that this problem is common to all administrations, countries and times, but that he had ‘never seen a thoughtful examination of the problem. It existed then, it exists today, and it ought to be recognized and planned for when organizing government.’

No Alternative Options?

For each case, I also ascertain that alternative options were available to eliminate the possibility that war was the only course of action. Wars may occur, for example, because a state is backed into a corner from which it can do nothing but fight (at the extreme, a state is hardly expected to do anything other than fight if it is under invasion). A problem to remain vigilant of here is that what constitutes a viable ‘alternative’ option is often subjective. A decision-maker may see war as necessary given their preferences and sensitivities to the costs of fighting (or not fighting), while another observer may argue that the constraints were not really that limiting after all. Both may seem right from within their respective framing of the choice. The best we can do is strive to examine the choices as the decision-makers apparently saw them at the time.

Insufficient Information?

Finally, for each case, I also ascertain that available information was at least good enough to eliminate the possibility that decisions were actually good ones, given the poor information. How this information was actually used is another matter. The use of information is a key part of correctly evaluating expectations and detecting positive illusions, so it is discussed in more detail in the next section.

EVIDENCE FOR POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

This is the key stage of analysis: Did decisions reflect expectations greater than the available information warranted despite adequate time for assessment and alternative options? If those criteria are met, then positive illusions are implicated. The challenge is determining on what basis expectations were over-optimistic. My analysis of evidence for positive illusions has two main tasks to meet this challenge. The first task in each case study is to examine what I label ‘Information and Reaction.’ This establishes whether relevant information – according to actors

---

Looking for Illusions

at the time and historical analyses – was available and conveyed to decision-makers, and how they reacted to it. The second task in each case study is to ask: In the light of this information, did decisions-makers exhibit positive illusions?

Information and Reaction

The positive illusions theory advanced in this thesis assumes that decision-makers act poorly despite good and available information. However, over-optimistic decisions may simply reflect the reverse: good decisions that were, unfortunately, based on poor information (if information was bad or misleading, in retrospect one cannot necessarily blame decision-makers for acting as they did). For each case, therefore, I ascertain that in addition to information being at least good enough to eliminate this possibility (one of the three fundamental alternative explanations above), information is – much more importantly – actually used effectively. I only attribute to positive illusions instances in which information was good and available, and yet the decision-makers neglected or made decisions inconsistent with them.

To do this, I examine decision-makers’ reactions to incoming information. Do they have a tendency to disregard it? If they do not, do they actually absorb it? Do they actively search for new information? This part of the analysis is crucial, because the simple fact of apparently bad decisions coinciding with contradictory information does not go far enough in testing the positive illusions theory. One has to determine that the decision-makers actually believed their policy would succeed, even in spite of objective evidence against it. Therefore, this section also tests whether decision-makers change or update their beliefs with increasing corrective information.\(^\text{18}\)

Updating would imply that positive illusions were gradually reduced due to a balanced decision-making process supplied with good information. Positive illusions do not make us immune to eventually approximating reality. However, we may be resistant and slow to change because ‘people are capable of explaining away, compartmentalizing, or otherwise dismissing or minimizing negative feedback.’\(^\text{19}\)


\(^\text{19}\) Taylor, S.E. and P.M. Gollwitzer (1995) 'The Effects of Mindset on Positive Illusions' Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 69: 213-226, p. 213. Information is extremely difficult to evaluate. The quality and amount of information is likely to have varied among the cases and it would be interesting to examine this directly as an additional antecedent condition influencing positive illusions (because positive illusions should be corrected faster where there is good intelligence and constant feedback, than in situations where there is bad intelligence and poor information flow). However, it is exceptionally difficult (if not impossible) to come up with credible ‘measurements’ of information availability, or even to generate valid rankings among cases. It is the perceived, rather than actual information that is crucial, but this is even harder to measure than the information itself. Moreover, how would one deal with changing intelligence capabilities over time? Was information better during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam than earlier in the century at Munich or the outbreak of WW I? One might argue that by the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam intelligence was much better resourced and technologically superior. However, such factors need not change the relative quality of the information among cases. In the two earlier cases, there was a significant challenge to determine enemy intentions as well as capabilities. It was unclear to decision-makers at Munich, for instance, exactly which states the opposing coalitions would eventually comprise of in the event of war. No improvement of intelligence technology is likely to create a sea change in such fundamental uncertainties.
Factors Implicating Positive Illusions

Positive illusions comprise exaggerated self-perceptions, exaggerated control over events, and over-optimistic expectations of the future. In international politics, I hypothesised that such effects would engender specific types of over-confidence: An over-estimation of one’s own side (and allies); an under-estimation of enemies (and allies); a neglect of intelligence; and both sides’ estimates of winning probability summing to greater than 1 (see Figure 3.1 and Table 3.1). Such over-confidence might be revealed by four measures. First, over-confidence as judged by other actors at the time, and by what historians and political scientists have concluded should have been clear at the time (i.e. controlling for the benefit of hindsight). Second, statements by decision-makers that express over-confident beliefs (ideally in private, not public, since the latter may partly be propaganda). Third, facts that betray over-confident beliefs (e.g. actual policies, decisions, commitments, or actions). Fourth, by a comparison of expectations to actual outcomes (were expectations over-optimistic in comparison to what was actually attained?). With a small number of cases, this last measure suffers from being judgmental after the fact. However, one can take multiple observations within a case to improve validity (do sequential decisions reflect new information?), and it nevertheless stands that ‘if the predicted performance exceeds the actual performance, then the prediction can be regarded as optimistic.’ Ideally, we want to see evidence of all four measures.

Statements Suggesting Positive Illusions

Politics is, very often, a series of displays and bluffs designed to disguise true intent. In other words, an analysis of what decision-makers say (especially in public, but also sometimes in private to certain other people) may in fact demonstrate very little because actors often have vested interests in pretending to believe one thing while, in reality, pursuing another. As John Mearsheimer put it bluntly, ‘It should be obvious to intelligent observers that the United States speaks one way and acts another.’ Ideally, one needs to know what the decision-makers really thought and believed. I have tried to identify this, where possible, by favouring private, not public statements, and aiming for sources (such as diaries and internal documents), which in theory reflect personal beliefs. Even these are problematic because people often write their diaries in the knowledge that they may be judged on them by later historians and by history. Clearly, looking for illusions is very tricky, as Geoffrey Blainey deftly illustrated. But it can nevertheless be revealing:

‘It is not easy to discover how an approaching war was pictured by those who had to decided whether to make war or avoid war. Public predictions of what a war will be like have to be fingered gingerly; they may be propaganda rather than predictions. A sounder guide is what leaders predicted privately. Even private statements however were often exaggerated in order

---

Looking for Illusions

to persuade reluctant colleagues that the war would be glorious. Moreover if war-eve expectations oscillated from day to day, they cannot easily be pinned down. To muster evidence of war-eve expectations is a slow task. They are not mentioned in hundreds of books and articles on the causes of particular wars, usually because these anticipations are considered irrelevant. Sometimes they are not mentioned by historians because the documents which they consulted did not clearly reveal them. When a ruler and the chief of his armed forces both believed that they would win a war, and win it quickly, their belief was not necessarily expressed in letters that passed between them: it was pointless to discuss something upon which they agreed. Nevertheless sufficient evidence survives to suggest that optimism was a persistent prelude to war.  

Facts Betraying Positive Illusions

A better method to reveal over-optimism is to look at facts. That is, to look at decisions actually taken, rather than just what decision-makers said they expected or said they would do. These can be argued to represent much more honest signals of intent, expectations or hopes, given that actions (such as sending troops to war) is a costly demonstration of one’s wishes and cannot easily be faked. Of course, even such extreme actions can be carried out in spite of the costs, and even without intending to fight, as a conscious and deliberate signal to other actors (e.g. mobilizing reserves). Even so, taking these possibilities into account, major policy decisions, such as the continued and massive-scale U.S. escalation in Vietnam, betrays underlying beliefs and expectations, as opposed to mere statements about beliefs and expectations, the latter of which can be made easily and cheaply for propaganda purposes.

NOTES OF CAUTION

Clearly, a critical part of the analysis will be to differentiate apparent positive illusions from alternative explanations of events, in particular from simultaneously operating international, domestic, institutional and bureaucratic constraints. Also, it will be critical to evaluate decisions from the perspective of the policy options actually considered, as opposed to all those potentially available – a difference which can have dramatic consequences on policy. Furthermore, despite the selection of cases that should challenge the theory (according to the criteria described in Appendix 3.3), it remains critical to weigh equally both confirmatory and contradictory evidence. This is a major problem with case study analysis because researchers have been shown to ‘pick and choose’ the evidence they include, which leads to a hypothesis-confirming bias (even if one

is trying to avoid exactly that). 24 Robert Jervis further warns that, even where misperceptions are evident, it remains difficult to separate those that led to poor decisions from those that did not:

‘Statesmen who miss, misperceive, or disregard evidence are not necessarily protecting their egos, being blind to reality, or acting in a way which will lead to an ineffective policy. The evidence is almost always ambiguous and no view can do justice to all the facts. In retrospect, one can always find numerous instances in which decision-makers who were wrong overlooked or misunderstood evidence that now stands out as a clear and important. But one can also note, first, that many facts supported the conclusions that turned out to be wrong and, second, those who were right treated the evidence in the same general way – i.e., they also ignored or misinterpreted information which conflicted with their views. 25

Thus, as the quotes at the beginning of this chapter remind us, it is easy to exploit hindsight to support a priori positions and focus unduly on examples of incompetence. An acknowledgement of this served as a warning and a guiding principal when conducting the case studies. We should not, however, let these problems prevent us from testing the hypothesis. Political science, and especially studies of war, must address difficult questions even if this means looking for the keys to puzzles in the dark, away from the familiar streetlights. 26 Potentially important hypotheses must be pursued despite the obstacles. So, while bearing these difficulties in mind, I now turn to my case studies with a thought for the determination espoused by Socrates when confronted with tricky but important hypotheses: ‘I would not be confident about everything I say about the argument: but one thing I would fight for to the end, both on word or deed if I were able – that if we believed we should try to find out what is not known, we should be better and braver and less idle than if we believed that what we do not know it is impossible to find out so that we need not even try.’ 27

---

27 Plato ‘The Meno.’

64
Chapter IV – World War I

‘A Brisk and Merry War’

Both the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) expected a quick victory in 1914.

Stephen Van Evera

The optimism on the eve of the First World War belonged to a long but unnoticed tradition. In one sense only was it unusual. That was probably the first war since 1803 to involve, from its very commencement, more than two major powers, and so the fighting was expected to be serious and destructive. As expectations of that war therefore carried a pessimistic thread, the optimistic threads must have been far thicker in order to weave the prevailing mood.

Geoffrey Blainey

Positive illusions should not have played a large part in the First World War for three reasons (see Table 4.1). First, both sides had considerable time for assessment of their potential enemies (precluding the hypothesis that decisions were simply knee-jerk reactions). Second, alternative options other than war were available, even though they were somewhat constrained by perceived military imperatives (precluding the hypothesis that decisions simply represented the only course of action). Third, intelligence information was reasonably accurate (precluding the hypothesis that decisions were good, given poor information).

WW I is also a tough test case because it is one of the most intensely studied conflicts in history, which has a plethora of existing explanations. Various economic, social, diplomatic and military factors predisposed the various powers to war. Furthermore, people were not oblivious to the danger. As noted in Geoffrey Blainey’s quote above, any optimism would have to be especially significant to overwhelm the expected devastation and horror of ‘modern’ war.

Despite the above, available information was not adequately used to form realistic expectations. Key decision-makers, the military and the public, on both sides, exhibited positive illusions about winning. Both sides thought that the war would be short, that they would win, and that war would be beneficial. Germany also seriously underestimated the likelihood and strength of states that would ally against them. Overall, there was an extraordinary popular enthusiasm for war.

**Table 4.1** Elimination of basic alternative explanations for the First World War and overview of conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elimination of basic alternatives</th>
<th>Central Powers</th>
<th>Triple Entente</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment opportunity</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Long (though a perceived window of opportunity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative options</td>
<td>Yes (though some perceived constraints)</td>
<td>Yes (though some perceived constraints)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information availability</td>
<td>Reasonable</td>
<td>Reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive illusions?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main factor</td>
<td>Expectation of victory</td>
<td>Expectation of victory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BACKGROUND**

The causes of the First World War have been hotly debated ever since the day it began. Even now, there is no consensus on which factors were most important in the road to a clash that would wipe out or mangle a generation of young men.3 The only consensus, perhaps, is that a diversity of economic, social, diplomatic and military circumstances conspired in an unfortunate manner.

---

coincidence to drag all of Europe’s Great Powers into war. As the July Crisis spiralled out of control in 1914 following the assassination of Austro-Hungary’s Archduke Ferdinand by Serbian nationalists, a widely perceived military imperative in modern warfare to strike first began to favour war whether the key decision-makers liked it or not. The tangle of alliances among states began to oblige them to take action, and ‘by 28-30 July the generals had taken over from the politicians and the nature of their plans made a general war among the great powers a virtual certainty.’\textsuperscript{4} However, this focus on the war being somehow inadvertent, or accidental, wholly overlooks an extraordinary atmosphere of bellicosity and enthusiasm for war that reigned supreme throughout Europe in the years prior to 1914. Indeed, this bellicosity had led to the propping up of Europe’s enormous armies on a perilous hair-trigger in the first place. Germany was particularly confident of victory, and had for years been developing their revered Schlieffen plan that would allow them to smash France, whose army, the German military authorities argued, was ‘not prepared for a fight.’\textsuperscript{5} But positive illusions were widespread across Europe:

‘The Russians too had parallel dreams of quick triumph, talking of victory in two or three months. Some Russian officers even boasted that they would reach Berlin in six weeks. French leaders expected a swift victory, and a British officer declared Germany would be “easy prey” for Britain and France. Austria and Russia each expected to defeat the other. Even the Turks caught the mood: In later 1914 the Turkish war minister confided that after victory in the Caucasus, Turkey might march through Afghanistan to India.’\textsuperscript{6}

**Traditional Explanations for the War**

Many historians see WW I as a result of a concatenation of unfortunate circumstances occurring simultaneously, and those circumstances are as diverse as they are numerous.\textsuperscript{7} The German historian Franz Fisher, and the ‘Fisher School’ of thought that followed, argued that the main cause was Austro-German expansionism, that Germany had long planned an ambitious preventive war, and that their *fait accompli* tactics in the Balkans deliberately pushed the other powers over the edge (this suggestion created a storm of a debate in the 1960s).\textsuperscript{8} Fischer argued that there had been a ‘conscious and deliberate grasp at world power, based on over-confidence on the part of Germany’s rulers.’\textsuperscript{9} Other authors focus on the intricate alliance system among the European Great Powers which, in a series of steps of who would side with whom, eventually meant the crisis in the Balkans would ensnare all of the major European states. Furthermore, there were long running arms races that predisposed states to suspect each other’s intended use of

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., p. 81.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p. 154.
their increasing arsenals. There was also the problem of inflexible military doctrines, and Russia’s and Germany’s war plans that called for attacks on multiple fronts to deliver knockout blows to anyone who threatened them (and thereby drawing in additional states).

The plans for pre-war mobilization (regardless of actual war plans) also had drastic consequences disposing each state to a precarious war footing. Some authors argue that Russia’s provocative mobilizations threatened both Austria and Germany to such an extent that they had no choice but to react. Russian civilian leaders had initially wanted to mobilize in the south only, thereby openly limiting their threat to Austria, but they were unaware that logistical constraints meant that mobilization had to occur either fully or not at all (Russia then tried to keep the general mobilization secret, but it was discovered by Germany two days later). Germany’s own mobilization would spark war directly, because its commencement would trigger an immediate attack on Liege in Belgium to seize the fortresses and rail junctions, objectives that Germany decided would have to be taken before they could be reinforced by the warning bells of German mobilization (which would take several days). This was seen as a critical part of the famous Schlieffen plan to outflank the French defences by lunging through Belgium into France.

Some also blame the war on the British failure to deter Germany or to restrain Russia. Had Britain made it clear that it would retaliate to an invasion of Belgium, Germany (and particularly the Kaiser) might at least have had second thoughts, and Russia would not have felt so isolated under the Austro-Germanic threat. Unfortunately, Britain did not realize that German mobilization meant war, so the need to restrain the Russian mobilization that would spark Germany’s own, was not understood. Hence, the cogs were meshed in place: Russian mobilization would trigger German mobilization, causing war.

Finally, there were also social and ideological pressures underlying these complex organizational entwinements. Nationalism, militarism and imperialism were important contributory factors, many directly leading to the establishment of the provocative alliances and military arrangements outlined above. Although these factors are less talked about, historian Gordon Martel notes that they are nevertheless ‘issues that will not go away.’

Of the above explanations for the war, perhaps one of the most dominating to date has been the intricate system of alliances. It may have attracted undue attention because alliances are ‘the easiest subject to explore when studying the origins of the war: they are well-documented; their terms can be analysed; their effectiveness can be measured.’ But the alliance system worked ‘far from systematically,’ and does not adequately provide an explanation for why all states were, in the end, willing to risk war to honour their alliance obligations. Indeed, ‘the Italians managed to avoid living up to their promises, while there was nothing on paper that bound the British to the Russians and the French.’

Together, these existing explanations might suggest that World War I was basically an accident. But the slippery path to war was not due to inadvertent blundering as much as

---

11 Ibid., p. 4.
12 Ibid., p. 85.
13 Ibid., p. 4.
misperceptions of opposing side’s intentions. In her recent survey of theories on the origins of the First World War, Annika Mombauer found no consensus on the causes of the war, but she did find ‘some consensus’ that a majority of historians today ‘would no longer support Lloyd George’s dictum of the European nations slithering into war accidentally.’

The Cult of the Offensive

Perhaps the most pervasive theory of the First World War today is the so-called ‘cult of the offensive,’ a phenomenon that is widely recognized to have existed among all of the European states of the time. Simply put, offensive military action was seen as the only method of achieving quick victory and preventing others from gaining the upper hand. This perception had increased rapidly after 1890 and reached a peak by 1914. The apparent advantages of offence were based on the expectation that modern armies, which were massive and could for the first time be moved around at high speed by rail, would be able to deliver a devastating and rapid blow against which defence would be futile. ‘Strategists had committed themselves to the view that standing on the defensive would lead to ruin.’ Hence, even if one side did not want to fight, to avert disaster under such circumstances there was a perception that one must nevertheless attack in order to pre-empt an enemy from doing the same.

There were alternative, non-military reasons for following offensive strategies. But the effect appears to have been compounded by poor relationships between political and military decision-makers in various European states:

‘On balance, offense tends to suit the needs of military organizations better than defense does, and militaries normally exhibit at least a moderate preference for offensive strategies and doctrines for that reason. What was special about the period before World War I was that the state of civil-military relations in each of the major powers tended to exacerbate that normal offensive bias, either because the lack of civilian control allowed it to grow unchecked or because an abnormal degree of civil-military conflict heightened the need for a self-protective ideology.’


Such civil-military conflicts appear to be a common cause of faulty assessments, both then and now. The perception in 1914 may have been further reinforced because military organizations were ‘not likely to admit that the problems which faced them were insoluble, and that they would be incapable in the future of conducting wars so effectively and decisively as they had in the past.’

Whatever its origins, the perception of offensive dominance is thought to have directly and powerfully contributed to war in 1914. In reality, when the offensive strategy came up against the actual, and huge, defensive advantage that existed (as a result of rapid-loading and accurate rifles, machine guns, barbed wire, entrenchments and colossal artillery barrages), what occurred was a carnage unprecedented in the history of war. Even railroads, which were initially thought to favour the offence, turned out to be a mixed blessing – defenders could sabotage them as they retreated, and different countries had different track-gauges so foreign trains could not always penetrate into home territory. The offensive-defensive imbalance was not apparent in all aspects and at all times. Nevertheless, it stands as a dominant theory for the war, and provides an underlying logic that helps to explain many of the other phenomena noted above that are well established to have contributed to the war.

The Remaining Puzzle

Even if the cult of the offensive accounts for much of the war, it has three limitations. First, it does not predict why all sides (including civilians, the military, and politicians) were enthusiastic about the war. We know that offensive dominance was a common and widely held perception even among civilians in Europe, especially in Germany and France. But if people perceived offence dominance, they should also have feared it – easy conquest was an opportunity, but also a dreadful threat to all states and their citizens because it could turn against them. So why did they welcome war?

Second, it does not explain why states thought they were superior to others and thought they would win (we might expect them to do so if they believed they would succeed in striking first and outwitting everyone else, but this begs the question – why would they believe that?). Even many German planners, who were worried about the rising power of rivals leaving them only a brief window of opportunity to exploit, nevertheless believed that they would win a war launched in 1914.

Third, this explanation is a fairly narrow one because it is limited to wars when a cult of the offensive exists. It does not explain why other wars occur when there is no such actual or perceived dominance of the offence. Van Evera found considerable support for offence dominance theory in his study of Europe and the U.S. since 1789, and in ancient China, but he would be the first to agree that it does not account for all wars. In other wars where decision-makers are primed to over-confidence (for whatever reason), this may spark a perceived offence-dominance for their own side only – hence emulating a similar effect, but not within the realms of the cult of the offensive theory.

Van Evera himself points out that the widespread perception of offence dominance ‘cannot explain every factor at work in 1914. Other important causes likely include: the rabid nationalist mythmaking that infected European societies after 1870; the bizarre false optimism with which all belligerents entered the war, which cannot be fully explained by concealments stemming form the cult of the offensive; the strange general belief that war was a positive and healthy activity.’ Positive illusions may serve a useful purpose here, because while they are concordant with a perception of offence dominance (at least for one’s own side), they bring added value in also accounting for these other factors and the concurrent belief in victory. Positive illusions predict inter-group beliefs of superiority, false optimism, and an optimistic outlook on war.

The very irresolvability of the origins of the First World War certainly suggests that, first, many factors were simultaneously at work (and therefore any existing single explanation is insufficient) and second, that there remains room for further explanations that might help to tie these diverse factors together. The enormous literature has fuelled, rather than resolved, the continual debate; ‘Hundreds of books and articles have been published on the subject over the decades, thousands of documents have been unearthed in archives and made available to historians – but nonetheless key issues are still far from resolved, and publications on the First World War and its origins continue in abundance.’ In the light of the continuing and unfinished puzzle, it is interesting to consider positive illusions as a contributory factor.

As I will show in the subsequent sections, there is good evidence that positive illusions played a significant role. Geoffrey Blainey argued that over-optimism was a major factor: ‘On the eve of a war that was to kill more soldiers and involve more nations that any other previous war one consolation was believed. The coming war, it was predicted, would be short … There was an even greater consolation to leaders who realised that the war, though short, would be terrifying. That consolation was victory. Both alliances expected victory.’ Twenty-five years later, Steven Van Evera concluded the same thing after his intensive study of the war: ‘Both the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) expected a quick victory in 1914.’ Significantly, this belief was held by the military, many politicians and civilians alike. Alfred Vagts noted that victory was ‘the belief of the soldiers and sailors of all the

---

Powers and of the statesmen acting on their advice,’ and John Merriman writes that ‘in Berlin and Paris during early August 1914, hundreds of thousands of people enthusiastically celebrated the outbreak of the war that many had begun to see as inevitable. On both sides, virtually everyone expected a short, victorious war. Their troops, heading off to the fighting in early August, would be “home before the leaves fall,” and then there would be more cheering and celebrations.’ It is hard to imagine how pervasive this atmosphere really was:

‘The kind of thinking that led people to rejoice at the prospect of war is now difficult to recapture – but rejoice they did: there was dancing in the streets and spontaneous demonstrations of support for governments throughout Europe. Men flocked to recruiting offices, fearful that the war might end before that had the opportunity to fight. There was a spirit of festival and a sense of community in all European cities as old class divisions and political rivalries were replaced by patriotic fervour.’

All this optimism would, of course, be ruthlessly scythed down over the months and years to come. By Christmas of the first year, Germany and France alone had lost 300,000 of their young men killed in action, with a further 600,000 wounded. And the war would drag on four more years.

THE TRIPLE ENTENTE: POSITIVE ILLUSIONS?

Many Frenchmen relished the opportunity to take revenge on their archenemy that they’d last encountered parading along the Champs Elysee after the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Despite that defeat, in 1914 ‘French military leaders were confident of victory.’ Some even talked of a ‘beautiful war,’ and General de Castelnau (deputy to the Chief of Staff General Joseph Joffre) announced ‘give me 700,000 men and I will conquer Europe.’ Many examples of such over-optimistic expectations of victory can be found in the books by Geoffrey Blainey and Stephen Van Evera. Some statements appear so ridiculous as to be amusing if it wasn’t for their dire consequences. But while they are often anecdotal, their prevalence and diverse sources reflect a widespread optimism underlying beliefs in the military, political circles, the media and the public – a repeated observation by historians that cannot be ignored. Moreover, the apparent over-confidence matches the facts and commitments evident in military and political planning.

Blainey found that ‘certainly the higher soldiers of France seemed confident in facing the same enemy which had humiliated them in 1870. In February 1914 they secretly issued plan 17,
which envisaged strong French thrusts into Germany should war arise. While German generals predicted that within six weeks of the outbreak of war their vanguard would be near Paris, many French generals predicted that their soldiers would be at or across the Rhine.\textsuperscript{36} There was a significant concern that Germany might, as it indeed would turn out to do, invade through Belgium, but Joffre ‘rejected all these warnings.’\textsuperscript{37} His ‘obstinacy’ was deemed to arise from his ‘full confidence in Plan 17. He believed that an all-out immediate offensive, one that was oblivious to the enemy’s intentions, location, and firepower, was the best strategy to pursue.’\textsuperscript{38} John Merriman corroborates this interpretation:

‘The French high command, which had known the basics of the Schlieffen Plan for years, did not believe the German army could move rapidly through Belgium, in part because the attacking forces would have to overcome the imposing fortress at Liege. The French also knew that the plan called for the incorporation of reserves into the main German army, and doubted they could quickly become an able fighting force … The French high command had its own plan for war. It, too, envisioned a rapid attack based on the \textit{élan}, or patriotic energy, of the troops … But having miscalculated the size of the effective German fighting force, the French also underestimated the speed with which their enemy could mobilize for war and attack.’\textsuperscript{39}

The French commander Foch ‘believed that morale was stronger than firepower,’ and the French army ‘went to war in 1914 believing that charges by massed ranks of infantry with artillery support could overwhelm the defensive power of magazine rifles and machine guns.’\textsuperscript{40} Both the French and British military held that ‘higher morale on the attacking side could overcome superior defensive firepower, and that higher morale could be achieved by assuming the role of attackers, since attacking would lift the soldiers’ spirits. One French officer contended that “the offensive doubles the energy of the troops”’.\textsuperscript{41} Even some Belgians, despite their tiny military and the prospect of their entire country becoming a war zone, were optimistic about the war. On hearing Germany’s ultimatum, one euphoric Belgian officer exclaimed, ‘war, what an exalting thing!’\textsuperscript{42}

The French extolled remarkable positive illusions about their people’s supremacy over the Germans, prompting claims that ‘we, the French, possess a fighter, a soldier, undeniably superior to the one beyond the Vosges in his racial qualities, activity, intelligence, spirit, power of exaltations, devotion, patriotism.’\textsuperscript{43} Even French schoolbooks noted that ‘one Frenchman is worth ten Germans,’ and as Stephen Van Evera notes, the ‘wide currency of such nationalist

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 171.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 33-34.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 25.
chest-pounding in prewar Europe goes far to explain the rosy optimism that infected both sides as they rode to war in 1914.’

The Russians, though fearful of Germany, were also confident. It too under-estimated the carnage that would result, which is all the more extraordinary given their relatively recent defeat by Japan in 1904-1905, a conflict that gave Russia a harsh insight into the reality of modern warfare. Perhaps most of all the Great Powers in 1914, Russia should have had the least illusions of victory. Yet, ‘in the elegant Russian capital of St. Petersburg the gilded domes reflected a halo of optimism that one would hardly expect in a nation which less that a decade ago had been humiliated by Japan in a war.’

The war minister General Soukhomlinov, was ‘confident’ in private as well as publicly, and ‘believed that victory would be achieved in a few months, and most of the Russian ministers agreed.’ A Russian diplomat in St. Petersburg at the time of the Russian mobilization ‘was one of many who observed in senior military circles the faith in a glorious victory.’ The Russian optimism is evident in the facts of their planning as well. Russia had settled on ‘an extremely ambitious strategy,’ that would involve a three-pronged attack on both Germany and Austria simultaneously.

In Britain too, ‘most ministers also expected a short war,’ and according to Gordon Martel, they even ‘rated themselves more highly than the Germans did.’ Paul Kennedy found that ‘qualitative assessments by British generals were all too obviously influenced by cultural and political prejudices.’ To their detriment, ‘no real effort was made within the CID [Committee of imperial Defence] or any other body to debate or to challenge statements about the quality of potential enemies’, or allies’, forces. This superiority diffused widely among British civilians. Viscount Esher noted that British high society ‘mostly look upon the war as a sort of picnic.’

One writer claimed that wars are ‘bracing tonics to the national health,’ and Lord Lansdowne suggested that wars were useful for ‘strengthening the moral fibre of a nation.’ The young men of Europe were, initially, in no way forced to the front against their will in 1914, and the scenes and stories of men flocking to volunteer are one of the pervading images of the war. Martel notes that ‘even in Britain, with its tiny professional army, amateur militarism was a popular entertainment before the war.’ He suggests that ‘the popular tide of warlike enthusiasm among the peoples of Europe’ could conceivably have ‘overwhelmed the statesmen who were unable to stem the tide of the forces that they had unleashed.’

---

50 Ibid., p. 191-192.
54 Ibid., p. 5. This brings to mind the Battle of Bull Run in the American Civil War, attended by many civilian spectators from Washington D.C. General Scott, the commander of the numerically superior Union forces, was apparently forced by public opinion to attack the Confederates with what he considered to be an under-trained force – and lost.
Overall, British assessments were considered to be relatively good. However, they seriously under-estimated the chance and likely success of a German push into Belgium. The British Expeditionary Force, while representing a certain foresight that such a force would be needed, was massively under-estimated for the ultimate task at hand – blocking the onslaught of the German army (French and British forces also unfortunately misjudged the place of the main attack). Military leaders were partly to blame for letting organizational preferences dictate planning, but political leaders ultimately under-estimated the strategic situation in a ‘naïve belief that only a limited amount of support would be necessary.’ The General Staff also ‘underrated many of the physical and technical aspects of modern warfare. Not only did they fail to appreciate the German capacity to crush fortified redoubts with the enormous Krupp and Skoda siege guns, but they also had not realized the value of machine guns.’

The General Staff also ‘underrated many of the physical and technical aspects of modern warfare. Not only did they fail to appreciate the German capacity to crush fortified redoubts with the enormous Krupp and Skoda siege guns, but they also had not realized the value of machine guns.’

Like the French, British officers held to the view that ‘modern [war] conditions have enormously increased the value of moral quality,’ and that ‘moral attributes [are] the primary causes of all great success,’ disastrously, therefore, the prevailing view was that ‘mind would prevail over matter; morale would triumph over machine guns.’

As with the Central Powers, the Triple Entente also exhibited a systematic tendency to under-estimate is foes yet over-estimate its allies. The British Director of Military Operations, General Henry Wilson, was very keen on the French, and extolled their virtues and experience from the French colonial wars. As for Russia, its weaknesses were recognized (such as a supposed lack of sufficiently trained officers), but the British still managed to estimate its power high enough to ‘reinforce the cozy assumption of some political figures that any “continental commitment” might be limited and temporary.’ Russia’s enormous manpower resources were expected to crush Germany from the east. Viscount Esher, ‘no mean military observer,’ declared on August 5, 1914 that ‘unless the Kaiser possessed the talents of Napoleon, “he is done a month hence when Russia advances”.’

Positive illusions are also evident in the way the British based their plans on their own – perceived-to-be-superior – doctrine and assumed the Germans would then permit them to carry it out. ‘The power of prejudice and preconception appears in Admiralty estimates of German naval strategy. Since British doctrine required a decisive clash of battle fleets, German plans had to be construed as leading to such an outcome.’ But this was totally unrealistic, and, most importantly, should have been clear at the time given their own intelligence reports. The Royal Navy expected naval engagements to occur away from the dangers of the German coast, and ‘with such a favourable scenario envisaged by the Admiralty and with no perception of the German superiority in armor, torpedoes, shells and mines, it is not surprising that British officers looked forward to fighting a modern-day Trafalgar in the middle of the North Sea. All that was

---

56 Ibid., p. 192.
59 Ibid., p. 175.
60 Ibid., p. 185.
needed was for the other side to oblige!'\textsuperscript{61} Senior commanders in the navy also thought submarines would be relatively useless, but of course the dreaded German U-boats were ‘to undermine both the Royal Navy’s strategy of offensive sweeps into the North Sea and its cozy assumptions about the security of seaborne traffic.’\textsuperscript{62}

The army suffered from seriously optimistic assumptions as well. ‘Like the navy, the army developed a net assessment which was largely a function of preconceptions as to how a war ought to be fought.’\textsuperscript{63} Part of these faulty assessments appeared to stem from ‘the struggle for the strategic leadership within British defense policy and to the corresponding competition for budget shares.’\textsuperscript{64} However, military commanders nevertheless held the additional belief that their own strategies were superior to those of their enemies, as well as superior to rival proposals from their compatriots. Paul Kennedy’s study of British pre-war assessment concluded that:

‘the British, while reasonably well prepared at the tactical and technical level for a short conflict, had failed – along with everyone else – to anticipate the grand-strategical aspects of a war involving all the great powers. This may seem a somewhat ungenerous summary at first sight. After all, the German naval threat on the high seas was contained; the military threat westward by the German army was checked in the fields of Belgium and northern France; as an additional bonus, Germany’s colonies and overseas trade were virtually eliminated; and, ultimately, the Allies did win the war! But the point is that almost no aspect of that eventual victory had been correctly assessed by the British prior to 1914.’\textsuperscript{65}

The first contingent of infantry was the British seventh division, which ‘arrived in France in October with 400 officers and 12,000 soldiers: after eighteen days of fighting around Ypres, it had 44 officers and 2,336 men left.’\textsuperscript{66} The British, ‘like the other belligerents, fought a war which they had failed to imagine.’\textsuperscript{67} And, like the other belligerents, most important expectations had been in the positive, over-confident direction. This over-confidence led not only to the outbreak of the war, but also to its persistence, its severity and the failure to adapt.

**THE CENTRAL POWERS: POSITIVE ILLUSIONS?**

Great confidence and enthusiasm was also event on the other side of the impending war. As German troops left for the field of battle in August 1914, the German Kaiser Wilhelm II appeared in shining armour before them to give a rousing address, declaring: ‘You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees.’ His address and optimism was ‘matched by similar expressions of overconfidence and military splendour in Austria, Russia, and the other nations on the brink of

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 186.  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 188.  
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 188.  
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 196.  
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p. 202.  

76
war.’

Within Germany, this optimism was not the sole peculiarity of the Kaiser. The German general staff, perhaps the most widely vaunted military institution in recent history, ‘expected to crush France in four weeks and finish off the rest of the Triple Entente in four months. Other Germans talked of victory in eight or ten weeks. A German officer [a Major-General] expressed the typical view: “The chances of achieving a speedy victory in a major European war are … very favourable for Germany”.’

A certain Count Haeseler announced that he ‘expected to breakfast at the Café de la Paix in Paris on Sedan Day (September 2),’ and another, Count Hochberg, ‘told a colleague in early August: “You and I will be meeting again in England”’. Van Evera summarises one German general’s assessment as a ‘forecast that the German army would sweep through Europe like a bus full of tourists.’ He declared that ‘in two weeks we shall defeat France, then we shall turn round, defeat Russia and then we shall march to the Balkans and establish order there.’

But it is important to stress that the optimism was not just a quirk of particular people. Obviously, the whole German population did not necessarily expect an easy victory, but during the July crisis, over-confidence was widespread in the institutions where it mattered: ‘A British observer noted the mood of “supreme confidence” in Berlin military circles, and a German observer reported that the German general staff “looks ahead to war with France with great confidence, expects to defeat France within four weeks”.’ Some military planners did foresee the advantage that defenders would hold on the battlefield, but ‘most German officers and civilians thought they could win a spectacular, decisive victory if they struck at the right moment … Victory, moreover, would be decisive and final.’

Positive illusions of victory were not confined to assessments of military performance. The optimism that pervaded German thinking led them to ‘underrate both the dangers that war posed and the risk that German-Austrian belligerence would cause it.’ German planners also tended to over-estimate the roll call and resilience of their allies, while simultaneously under-estimating those of their potential enemies. It was hugely optimistic to expect that, as ‘many Germans’ did, ‘the Entente powers would peacefully accept Austria’s crushing of Serbia.’

On July 26, the German Foreign Minister Gottlieb von Jagow was ‘sure of England’s neutrality.’ This was a vital assumption. Once the war was underway, the Kaiser lamented that ‘if only someone had told me beforehand that England would take up arms against us.’ Even in the event that Britain would try to intervene, German planners thought the German army would be able to defeat France before the British had a chance to gain a foothold. Hence, they discounted the British threat out of hand, and ‘believed that the small, volunteer British army posed little threat.’

If anything, they would just be swept aside along with the French. General von Moltke, Chief of the General Staff, ‘was convinced that, even if the British did enter the war … the

---

70 Ibid., p. 19.
71 Ibid., p. 204.
72 Ibid., p. 19.
73 Ibid., p. 143.
74 Ibid., p. 222.
French could still be beaten quickly and decisively; the 150,000 men of the British expeditionary force would make no difference. The threat from Britain was, at the time, ambiguous, and ‘no one, not the Russians, not the French, not the Central Powers, knew what Britain’s response to the crisis would be.’ Given the uncertainty of whether Britain would fight, Germany was astonishingly optimistic in planning on the basis that it would not. Few contingency plans allowed for that eventuality. An enormous burden hung on this optimistic assessment, because the whole German war plan was grounded on being able to destroy France in the few weeks before Russia was fully capable, when it would then have to switch its main forces to the eastern front.

The Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, after sending his ultimatum to Russia and France, uttered the immortal pronouncement that ‘if the iron dice are now to be rolled, may Gold help us.’ But as Blainey observes, ‘while warfare was a game of dice, it was also a game of chess, and in that game the German leaders believed they were masters.’ Bethmann Hollweg himself was confident, and ‘believed that the war should be over, at the most in four months.’ Moltke predicted defeating France in 6 weeks. Count von Lerchenfeld reported that the German General staff expected to defeat France in 4 weeks, and he later noted that ‘military circles in Berlin were utterly confident, even though Germany and Austria “will be facing the whole world”.’

Not all the European states expressed unrealistic over-confidence. Austria-Hungary, while they certainly did not expect an Austro-German defeat, did not expect any quick victory. They had a relatively inferior military to the other Great Powers and rightly expected the war would be a difficult struggle. Germany continued its exuberance, however. Even once the war was into its first month, German troops were expected home by Christmas and German diplomats didn’t bother with any attempt to obtain Italy’s allegiance, as they didn’t think they would need it. In a few short weeks, the army ground to a bloody halt at a vast front line of trenches stretching from Belgium to Switzerland. As John Merriman put it, these ‘two long, thin lines of trenches’ finally ‘punctured the dreams of rapid victory based upon a mastery of offensive tactics.’

Among the navy too, there was an almost complacent over-confidence. Admiral Bachmann was ‘so sure of the ability of submarines to sink the merchant vessels on which Britain relied that he predicted panic in Britain and surrender within six weeks.’ Extraordinary as this comment already was, at the time it was made Germany itself was already short of raw materials and food, and ‘had not prepared adequately for a war that had now lasted half a year, let alone a war eight times that long.’

Their enemies were concurrently committing an identical over-confidence on this issue. In London there had been a remarkable ‘absence of investigation of how Britain herself might be damaged economically by cessation of Anglo-German trade’ (let alone the effects of a

---

77 Ibid., p. 85.
79 Ibid., p. 36.
80 Ibid., p. 37.
blockade). Britain relied on Germany for a significant portion of its exports and imports, and despite recognition of this, a Board of Trade report ‘offered cheery assumptions about the losses the Germans would endure if they could no longer import vast amounts from the British Empire, and it made the outcome seem even desirable by detailing the areas in which British producers would benefit from the elimination of German competition.'

This was bad enough, but before the war the British Admiralty claimed that it would be the other way around anyway – ‘the enemy would be grievously hurt by a [British] blockade,’ and this was an assumption that went unchallenged, even after reports on the ‘relative invulnerability of the German economy,’ corroborated by a German study forwarded by the naval attaché in Berlin, ‘demonstrating how nearly self-sufficient Germany could be.’ There were also significant positive illusions about the superiority of German culture: ‘Wilhelmine-era German nationalists proclaimed that Germans were “the greatest civilized people known to history” and that “the German should feel himself raised above all the peoples who surround him and whom he sees at an immeasurable depth below him.” Germans were assured that “the French Army lacks the … united spirit which characterizes the German army, the tenacious strength of the German race, and the esprit de corps of the officers”’.

Even ‘leading intellectuals’ such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann stirred the great optimism and righteousness of a German war, and:

‘viewed the war as an essential defence against hostile forces representing cultures less rich and technologies less advanced. In “Funf Gesange” Rilke, the leading lyric poet in the language celebrated the resurrection of the god of war rather than a symbol of weak-minded peace. In defence of Kultur, Mann went to occupied Belgium to observe the future. To be excoriated as Hun barbarians when Germans allegedly represented the higher civilization appeared to him an absurd inversion of values, a feeling shared by educated young officers at the front who came out of professional life.’

There were also extraordinary positive illusions about the costs and benefits of war. As Van Evera describes, many Europeans believed that:

‘a great war would be a beneficial, healthy exercise for society … German publicists stressed “the inevitableness, the idealism, and the blessing of war,” and declared that war was a “savoir and a healer,” “the periodically indispensable solution” to national problems, which brought “uprise and adventure, heroism and excess, cold deliberation and glowing idealism.” A German newspaper called for a “brisk and merry war,” as if this were possible. A leading German historian wrote of “the grandeur of war.” German youths were told that “war is...

---

84 Ibid., p. 199.
85 Ibid., p. 198.
86 Ibid., p. 199.

79
beautiful.” A German officer argued that war is a “powerful promoter of civilization” and is “fought in the interest of biological, social, and moral progress.” When war broke out, the German crown prince summoned his compatriots to a “bright and jolly war”.  

All in all, a large proportion of the population from all levels and roles in society, and on both sides of the conflict, looked forward to war and expected nothing less than victory. If widespread over-confidence fails to convince the reader that it was a significant factor in triggering the outbreak of war, it is important to stress, in response, that I am arguing that positive illusions offer an additional factor in explaining the war; it is by no means an exclusive theory.

CONCLUSIONS

Annika Mombauer’s recent survey of the historiography of the First World War suggests that ‘it might seem as if historians have analysed every possible angle and have advanced every plausible, and indeed some implausible, theories regarding the origins of the war. Can there be anything left to argue about? Surely, historians have arrived at a consensus which most can accept?’ But in fact, as she continues, the opposite may be true: ‘This does not mean that the general interest in the topic has abated. On the contrary, Foerster detects an international trend of intensified discussion of the First World War as a whole, while key questions, particularly in view of the war’s origins, remain unresolved despite all efforts.’

Long ago now, Geoffrey Blainey pointed to over-optimism as a key cause of the First World War, and also many – if not most – other wars: The ‘war-eve optimism of 1914 has usually been seen as an exceptional mood. It was not exceptional, but simply more conspicuous … An analysis of the hopes and fears held on the eve of earlier wars reveals a similar optimism.’

Certainly in 1914, he argued, ‘both sides were confident of victory. Even Russia, France and Austria, each of which had lost its last major war, expected victory. Underlying the optimism of European leaders in 1914 was something more powerful than their knowledge of recent military and financial history.’

Stephen Van Evera, in 1999, also identified a ‘bizarre’ false optimism that accompanied many wars throughout history, and again particularly in 1914.

---

91 Ibid., p. 208-209. A curious aside is the undue confidence that Mombauer notes has been assigned to the theories themselves, rather than the events they describe. From p. 224: ‘The current consensus is thus that Germany bore the main share, or at least a very large share of the blame, but that the policies of other European governments also need to be considered for a fair judgement. Such a measured conclusion seems substantiated by the available evidence. And yet, in the course of this study we have encountered many such confident statements. During the 1950s it was felt that historians moved “on safe ground” regarding the First World War, as Walther Hubatsch asserted, just as in the 1930s George P. Gooch had been similarly confident that the riddle of the origins of the war had been solved.’ Do historians exhibit positive illusions about their theories, in the way that 94% of college professors rate their work as above average? (see Chapter 2).
93 Ibid., p. 40.
His own development of the more general cult of the offensive theory, while perhaps the most pervasive explanation for WW I, still does not entirely account for the underlying and widespread over-confidence. Perhaps then, it is no coincidence that Mombauer can conclude that the causes of this war are still unresolved, while at the same time Blainey’s and Van Evera’s insight remains apparent but largely unexplained – why do people exhibit this false optimism? One parsimonious explanation to fill the discordant gaps in current explanations of the origins of the First World War is to find a theory that predicts over-confidence. Positive illusions is such a theory.

Over-confidence was not only limited to pre-war strategic assessment. The war itself also contained many elements consistent with positive illusions. Stories of incredible over-confidence and apocalyptic slaughter are commonplace from the western front where ‘year after year,’ as Churchill wrote, the generals ‘conducted with obstinacy and serene confidence offensives which we now know to have been as hopeless as they were disastrous.’\textsuperscript{95} Such stories are well known, but over-confidence was not limited to the western front stereotype. The invasion of Turkey at Gallipoli in April 1915 also suffered from severe over-confidence. There was a:

‘mood of buoyant optimism that predominated at all levels before the first landings took place, a mood that owed much to a failure to consider exactly what an amphibious operation might entail and not a little to a deeply entrenched attitude of racist superiority toward the Turkish people in general and the Turkish army in particular. The notion that British troops – any British troops – must be superior to their Turkish opponents was the counterpart of the notion of prestige as the basis of British imperial rule. It was widespread throughout all levels of British society, and the expedition’s commander was deeply impregnated with it. “Let me bring my lads face to face with Turks in the open field,” he begged his diary some three weeks before Suvla Bay. “We must beat them every time because British volunteer soldiers are superior individuals to Anatolians, Syrians or Arabs [and] are animated with a superior ideal and an equal joy in battle.” Hamilton valued each British soldier as worth several dozen Turks; at Suvla Bay the cold statistics suggest that every Turk was the equal of ten Britons.’\textsuperscript{96}

Such a plan of assault had been strongly advised against by the British admiral on location, who instead recommended a much ‘longer-drawn-out operation’ that would fully exploit bombardment of Turkish defences and thorough minesweeping. Field Marshall Lord Kitchener initially estimated that 150,000 troops would be necessary for such an operation. Not only could a mere 70,000 be spared from the western front, but their allotted task also expanded hugely because, ‘as the weeks passed the excessive hopes placed in the efficacy of naval bombardment were revealed to be far too overoptimistic.’\textsuperscript{97} The army’s role in the operation consequently had to change from simply supporting the navy (by destroying artillery batteries along the coast) to fully seizing the peninsular in a ground assault – and all this with less than half the troops initially envisaged necessary even for the original, more basic task.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., p. 134.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., p. 136.
Over-confidence caused problems for all sides of the war. Germany, for example, had committed itself to ‘a wildly over ambitious offensive strategy,’ and Russia’s strategy was also ‘extremely ambitious.’ According to Jack Snyder, on both the western and eastern fronts ‘each offensive failed to achieve its ambitious goals and, in doing so, created major disadvantages for the state that launched it’:

‘none of these disasters was unpredictable or unpredicted. It was not only seers like Ivan Block [who gave an early but ignored forecast of the horrors to come] who anticipated the stalemed positional warfare. General Staff strategists themselves, in their more lucid moments, foresaw these outcomes with astonishing accuracy … This is not to say that European war planners fully appreciated the overwhelming advantages of the defender; partly they underrated those advantages, partly they defied them. The point is that our own 20/20 hindsight is not qualitatively different from the understanding that was achievable by the historical protagonists.’

This is of key importance to the positive illusions theory – we can, to some extent, rule out the possibility that events only seem over-optimistic with the benefit of hindsight. On the contrary, as illustrated in the many examples above and by Snyder’s analysis, pre-war assumptions and the first clashes of the war were not the result of intelligence failures or lack of information. The information was available; expectations simply did not reflect them. Even where information was absent on particular issues, initial assessments were systematically biased in a positive direction. Given all this, Snyder asks ‘why then were these self-defeating, war-causing strategies adopted?’ Again, positive illusions certainly seem to provide one potential solution.

Gordon Martel noted that it is ultimate explanations that are most needed. ‘Few historians today would choose to focus their attention exclusively on the immediate events that led to war; the most widespread assumption underlying contemporary interpretations of the First World War is that the crisis of July was the logical (if not necessarily the inevitable) culmination of deep-seated antagonisms and fundamental forces.’ Indeed, ‘the farther back in time historians go in tracing the story of origins, the more likely it is that they see general, underlying causes as the proper explanation for the war: particular personalities and specific events fade against a more illuminating background.’ Some historians have even traced back the origins of the First World War to major shifts in ancient history. This included the ‘triumph of rationalism in Greece, which replaced a peaceful, matriarchal culture with a warlike, masculine one.’ Perhaps the search can be taken a step further. Adaptive positive illusions in our evolutionary past form an even more

---

102 Ibid., p. 13.
ancient foundation for a simmering human optimism that, at times, circumstances allow to flare up out of control and cause war.\textsuperscript{104}

Other explanations for the complacency in 1914 do not seem to be enough. The ‘short war’ expectation, for example, could have logically arisen from the experience of recent European history in which most wars had indeed been decided very quickly. Martel noted that ‘the most persistent assumption underlying the decisions of July 1914 was the illusion that the war would be short.’\textsuperscript{105} However, as Blainey argues, expectations of a short war fail to explain why each side thought that, as well as wars being short, they would be victorious. ‘In a mind’s picture of a forthcoming war the likely duration of the fighting and its likely outcome are almost inseparable.’\textsuperscript{106}

The Willingness to Accept the Risks of War

A critic may argue that the much more important reason for the war was that each state had no other option \textit{but} to fight. In other words, \textit{inaction} was not really seen as an option. For example, maybe it was ‘not the alliance “system” that drew the great powers into war in 1914, but the belief that it was more dangerous to stay out of a war than enter into one.’\textsuperscript{107} Other factors also constrained political choices. For example, the Russian government could expect to be ‘severely shaken by opposition had it failed to respond forcefully to Austria-Hungary’s ultimatum.’\textsuperscript{108} One can also argue that regardless of whether Germany invaded Belgium or not, Britain ‘would have intervened in any case, believing that this was essential to preserve the balance of power and prevent the German domination of Europe.’\textsuperscript{109} Thus decision-makers may have preferred to risk war than to risk the consequences of not fighting. Overall, therefore, one can argue that July 1914


\textsuperscript{105} Martel, G. (1987) \textit{The Origins of the First World War} Longman, Harlow, p. 84. Martel goes on to say that this was based on the assumptions about how technology (transportation and communication) would give unprecedented advantages in speed and mobility in attack. It is no less bizarre though, given that each side had the same opportunity and nevertheless thought it would be mainly to their own advantage.

\textsuperscript{106} Blainey, G.A. (1973) \textit{The Causes of War} Free Press, New York, p. 40. Blainey further defends this point on p. 41: ‘From the expectations which preceded more than a score of wars since 1700, a curious parallel emerges. Nations confident of victory in a forthcoming war were usually confident that victory would come quickly. Nations which entered a war reluctantly, hoping to avoid defeat rather than snatch victory, were more inclined to believe that they were embarking on a long struggle. The kinds of arguments and intuitions which encouraged leaders to expect a victorious war strongly influenced their belief that the war would also be swift. The belief in a short war was mainly the overflow from the reservoir of conscious superiority.’

\textsuperscript{107} Martel, G. (1987) \textit{The Origins of the First World War} Longman, Harlow, p. 86. He continues: ‘Each of the great powers decided in 1914 that they had vital interests at stake, interests for which it was worth risking defeat, dismemberment, impoverishment and social revolution. Had they anticipated the extent of the carnage, the duration of the war, the political and social chaos that it caused, they might have made different decisions. But even this is doubtful. By and large the men who made the decisions, drawn mainly from the traditional ruling classes of Europe, believed it better to die honourably than to survive in disgrace – and this applied to their states as well as to themselves. This was especially true of the eastern powers, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany, who felt that they were already teetering on the brink of a disaster, and that war (which they hoped and assumed would be successful) was the only alternative to a humiliating diplomatic defeat.’

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p. 87.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p. 83.
‘was a brinkmanship crisis, resulting in a war that everyone was willing to risk but that no one truly wanted.’\textsuperscript{110} Hence, there are reasons to think that war occurred because states were entrapped into a war-like response.

However, this is an important but insufficient argument because, like the other alternative explanations of the ‘cult of the offensive’ or the idea that states simply thought the war would be short, it flatly fails to account for each side’s enthusiasm and ambition of the war. But there is another reason to counter this proposition. Even if states perceived that they simply had no option but to go to war, this presupposes that deciding to fight would achieve some gain. Martel himself argues that even if the only alternative seemed to be war, states also still ‘hoped and assumed’ that the war would be successful. Therefore, war was never seen as that bad an alternative after all.\textsuperscript{111} This is illustrated by the German reasoning for war:

‘while most political and military decision-makers in Berlin did not actually want a European war [i.e. they hoped it would not flare up beyond attacking France and Russia], they were certainly willing to risk it. They had been encouraged to do so by Germany’s leading military advisers, who had advocated war “the sooner the better” on many occasions and had assured the politicians that Germany stood a good chance of defeating its enemies. Germany’s military leaders had been conjuring up the image of a Russia that could still be defeated by Germany at this time, but that in future would be too strong to be taken on successfully.’\textsuperscript{112}

The fact that they were willing to risk it in 1914 conforms to, if not actually requires, the notion that even states that felt they were backed into a corner were also optimistic that they would win.

**Unbridled Over-confidence**

The question of why war erupted in 1914 and not during the various earlier crises that had occurred between the same European powers in preceding years (the First and Second Moroccan Crises, and the First and Second Balkan Wars), implies that factors unique to July 1914 were instrumental in causing war. One factor that seems to have exacerbated positive illusions to particularly high levels at this time is each state’s lack of open debate on the war. In the years leading up to 1914, military plans were secret and often not known even to their country’s own minister of foreign affairs or diplomats. In Germany, the Chancellor, Secretary of State, Admiral Tirpitz, and ‘probably’ even the Kaiser were unaware that German mobilization would trigger an immediate offensive against Liege.\textsuperscript{113} The Schlieffen plan itself was a ‘flawed scheme’ that might have been modified in Germany’s favour had it been better debated, but as it was its ‘illogic was


hidden by secrecy.'\textsuperscript{114} Even in democratic Britain, which had systems in place specifically to arrange for political-military consultation, strategic assessment was hampered by several instances of exclusive decision-making.\textsuperscript{115} Before the war, Britain’s foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey ‘kept those members of the cabinet who were known to be opposed to any British armed intervention in the dark concerning the details of the crisis and the expectations of support in France and Russia.’\textsuperscript{116} At the same time, Grey did not know himself about the British and French militaries’ plans for cooperation. In Austria and Russia too, there were several instances of military officials withholding ‘crucial data from civilians.’\textsuperscript{117} This created a farce in which diplomats were vying for peaceful settlements without knowing that their militaries were already becoming locked into a war footing.

As will be revisited in later case studies, the openness of debate often appears to be crucial in stamping out precisely the kind of over-confident assessments that were allowed to run riot in 1914. The relevant information may exist, the inherent caution of a diplomat may be in play, but key actors subverted the system by restricting the debate and screening the diversity of opinions. Decision-makers’ baseline over-confidence was not effectively challenged. Ernest May found faulty but important assumptions failed to be corrected, or even to be scrutinised, in Britain, Germany and Russia alike.\textsuperscript{118} The degree of damage this incurred appears to have increased with the degree of closure in decision-making:

‘For all their muddle, the British understood how the various powers were aligned. And while each Russian may have used his own particular map of the external world, each used more or less the same map most of the time. The Kaiser, by contrast, could go in a matter of hours from conceiving Germany the center of a United States of Europe to seeing it encircled and besieged by enemies. And the structure of government provided little or no safeguard against having the wholly wrong perception govern national policy. Everything depended on the wisdom of the man at the top.’\textsuperscript{119}

Within the militaries as well, institutional biases often eliminated any prospects for correcting over-confidence or adapting to circumstances. A striking example in the British army comes from Eliot Cohen and John Gooch’s analysis:

‘The personalized promotion system … ensured that middle-ranking officers undertook offensives of no tactical or strategical use whether they believed in them or not: If they obeyed orders, they could hope for promotion, but if they did anything else they faced the

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 141.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., p. 32.
certainty of removal and disgrace. The way Haig ran his headquarters, preserving an Olympian detachment, tolerating no criticism, and accepting precious little advice, reinforced the rigidity of the system.¹²⁰

The Stinging Ice of Reality

With hindsight it is difficult to imagine why people held the extraordinary views that they did in 1914. Blainey suggests that the ‘complicated trellis of hope – a criss-cross of military and financial fact and fantasy – tempered the horror of the coming war.’¹²¹ Forgetting or failing to imagine the suffering of war appears to be a recurrent theme of the human experience. Before the outbreak of war there is often a general willingness to fight. But once people begin to be killed in large numbers, the original enthusiasm gives way. The particular blunder of the First World War is commonly attributed to a misunderstanding of the results of densely packed men attacking trenches filled with machine guns. However, what is perhaps most remarkable is that exactly this happened in the war between Russia and Japan only 10 years before. It was well documented, and the Russians at the least (especially having lost), should have been particularly cognizant of this. Indeed, they actually did change their policy for a while: ‘Russian planners returned to a more defensive approach after Russia’s defeat in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese war, and they adhered to a defensive doctrine until 1912.’¹²² But it wasn’t long before buoyant enthusiasm arose once again just in time to repeat the carnage in World War I.

The ‘picnic’ that many Britons had envisaged rapidly changed into a bloodbath that would haunt a generation. But it literally took the death of millions to remind the opposing populations and their leaders of the horrors of war. The excruciating failure, initially, and then the slowness to adapt testifies to the initial optimism and simplistic expectations that had launched the war:

‘Once the surface naval war had assumed the shape of a stalemate, once the campaigns on the western front had lost their mobility, and once the first shocks to the international credit and transport system had been overcome, Britain’s prewar assessments and planning were shown to be inadequate. The changed conditions of land warfare had not been anticipated by the General Staff, with the dual consequence that it did not possess the reserves of materiel for that type of war and that it had not given thought to how such physical obstacles could be overcome, except by putting pressure upon the enemy’s trenches by deploying ever more men and guns.’¹²³

Psychologist Yechiel Klar’s study of positive illusions under the threat of terrorism in Israel suggests that they vary dramatically before a person experiences a danger versus whilst that

danger is taking a direct toll around them: ‘People are optimistically inclined mainly when the negative events under study are hypothetical and “psychologically unreal.” In contrast, when the group to which people belong is the target of some significant ongoing calamity, even when the participants themselves are currently not the direct victims, the unreality of the event dissolves and optimism (both absolute and comparative) decreases or vanishes altogether.’

Even this corrective effect may be short-lived, however. John Stoessinger wrote that the ‘old people to whom I spoke about the war remembered its outbreak as a time of glory and rejoicing. Distance had romanticized their memories, muted the anguish, and subdued the horror.’

So it seems to be with war. We forget the last well enough to become optimistic about the next. This may well be another legacy from our evolutionary history – the blocking out of negative information is a well-known phenomenon with potentially important adaptive functions, but at times this may have deadly consequences.

Even the extreme lessons of the First World War are often forgotten, but it did go some way to the ‘shattering of illusions that war could be short and glorious.’

---

124 Klar, Y., D. Zakay and K. Sharvit (In Press) ”If I Don't Get Blown up…”: Realism in Face of Terrorism in an Israeli Nationwide Sample’ Risk, Decision and Policy, p. 17 (of submitted manuscript). These authors also note that ‘comparative optimism is mainly found when people believe that avoiding the negative consequences of the risk is within their powers,’ p. 18.


Chapter V – The Munich Crisis

Blind Ambitions

The Prime Minister, Sir Thomas Inskip, Sir John Simon ... they are blind to what seems to others the most obvious aspects of the contemporary world. These simply do not reach them. In the case of the Prime Minister this blindness is an essential element in his strength. If he could see even a little, if he became even faintly cognisant of the turmoil of ideas and projects and schemes to save the country which are tormenting the rest of us, his superbly brazen self-confidence would be fatally impaired.

John Maynard Keynes ¹

Hitler’s belligerent speech of September 26 and their own boldness frightened the British and French majority into backing down; their warning had been a bluff.

Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing ²

The Munich Crisis forms the first of my two crisis case studies. Both serve to test this thesis’s reverse hypothesis – that, while positive illusions might propel states into a crisis in which war becomes particularly likely, a subsequent reduction of positive illusions leads to peace, not war. The Munich Crisis provides a challenging test case because positive illusions are not expected for the following reasons. First, both the Allies and Hitler had a long period of time to assess each other’s motivations and capabilities (precluding the hypothesis that decisions were simply knee-

jerk reactions). Second, alternative options were available (precluding the hypothesis that decisions simply represented the only course of action). Third, intelligence information was, though flawed in some key aspects, good enough to appreciate the general asymmetries (precluding the hypothesis that decisions were good, given poor information). See a summary of these points in Table 5.1.

The Munich Crisis is also a challenging test case because it is one of the most intensively studied crises in history, thus already having well-established explanations.

I argue that Chamberlain seriously under-estimated the aggressiveness of Hitler’s intentions, if not his capabilities (the latter were, if anything, exaggerated). This meant that although over-optimistic views influenced Chamberlain’s dogged pursuit of an unlikely peace, there were no positive illusions that the Allies would win a war at that time. On the other side, while Hitler’s bold strategic ambitions threw them into the crisis, the German rearmament programme was still in progress, and Hitler’s advisors successfully dampened any expectations that he could win a war at this time. Thus, I argue that this crisis did not develop into war partly because initially optimistic strategies that propelled them into crisis were successfully dispelled.

**Table 5.1.** Elimination of basic alternative explanations for the Munich Crisis and overview of conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elimination of basic alternatives</th>
<th>Britain</th>
<th>Germany</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment opportunity</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative options</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information availability</td>
<td>Partly flawed</td>
<td>Reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive illusions?</td>
<td>Some* (but not at end)</td>
<td>Yes (but not at end)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main factor</td>
<td>Expectation of diplomatic peace (at end: Fear of war)</td>
<td>Enormous ambitions (at end: Fear of defeat in a premature war)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Chamberlain did have illusions about Hitler’s intentions, but not about his military capabilities.

**BACKGROUND**

On 16 September 1938 Hitler addressed the Nazi Party Congress, demanding self-determination for the German-speaking peoples living in the Sudetenland (then within Czechoslovakia). This
was the latest in a series of aggressive German moves, and Europe was slowly shoring up resolve to halt Hitler’s seemingly relentless ambition. Over the ensuing crisis that this caused, the Russians were asked by the Czech government to confirm their continued commitment to the Russian-Czech Pact in the event of a German invasion. They responded that they were, but that this was conditional upon prior French action. The French also claimed that they would honour their Treaty of Alliance with Czechoslovakia but that their military response would hinge on Britain guaranteeing an attack force, since the French Prime Minister, Daladier, believed that the French Army was only capable of providing a defensive role. Thus, there was a passing down of responsibility from the Russians to the French to the British, as ultimate guarantors of the defence of Czechoslovakia. Despite this threat, Hitler remained intent on attaining his goals, and a serious threat of war hung over Europe during the crisis. Conflict was finally averted by the Four Power Agreement, signed on 30 September by Britain, France, Italy and Germany, which brought peace at the expense of the Czechs, who were not part of the agreement and yet were forced to accept its terms (the main term being the annexation of the industrially rich Sudetenland by Germany). In this Chapter I examine why, although both sides consciously blurred strength, the Allies did not stand up to Hitler militarily in 1938, and why Hitler also preferred diplomatic rather than military means at that stage. I also examine what changed for Hitler to finally choose war the following year.

BRITAIN

Britain: Information and Reaction

The story of British intelligence before World War II is commonly presented as a catalogue of flaws and errors. The various intelligence gathering services, and intelligence assessment, were not well coordinated throughout the entire period between the two world wars. A new organization founded in 1936 to centralize intelligence analysis – the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) – was ‘virtually boycotted by the Foreign Office until July 1939 and achieved little until after the war began. During the final years of peace and the early months of war Whitehall received a remarkable mixture of good and dreadful intelligence and was frequently incapable of distinguishing the two.’ This led to some important errors in assessing German capabilities. However, if anything, these errors exaggerated German military capabilities and the speed of its rearmament program. Thus, the Allied information suggested they did not have good chances of winning a war in 1938. Hitler had been bluffing, and largely succeeded:

‘In 1936, for instance, the best guesses of British Intelligence were about 100 per cent too great. In 1940, when the German army was supposed to have been overwhelming and to have defeated the French by a mass of metal, the French in fact had more tanks than the Germans.

And by 1940, Great Britain was producing more tanks, more aeroplanes – in fact, more of everything except rifles – than Germany, and kept ahead all through the war. It was not so much that Germany had more armaments, but that from quite an early stage, Hitler said she had.

What was actually more important in the pre-war diplomacy was assessing German aims and intentions rather than their military strength (military capabilities were irrelevant if they were not going to fight, and in any case Hitler remained to name who his enemies would be). Assessments of intentions are so difficult that, according to Robert Jervis, states often resort to ‘an approach that, were it suggested by an academic, would be seen as an example of how out of touch scholars are with international realities. On several occasions, states directly ask their adversaries what it is they want. The British frequently discussed directing such an inquiry to Hitler’. Such was their uncertainty. In the end, of course, Chamberlain did ask him, and bought Hitler’s bluff wholesale.

Despite a concordance of various sources of information confirming the rapid German rearmament, Britain was split on how to act upon this information. There were the appeasers (led by Chamberlain), who believed that Germany need not be a threat to Britain and peace should be sought. On the other side, there were the non-appeasers (notably Churchill), who expected war or at least the need for a credible deterrent threat and therefore clamoured for a major armaments build up. Chamberlain clung to the hope that it would be possible to negotiate peace and, most importantly, maintained the view that Hitler’s intentions were limited – buying the claim that Germany simply wanted to redress the injustices imposed upon them in the Treaty of Versailles and unite the German speaking peoples. For Chamberlain ‘it was better to gain German friendship by generosity than to incur enmity by a firmness that was essentially a bluff, given British military weakness’. Mussolini was also threatening the peace with his desire to make Italy great again. Given the inflammatory circumstances, Chamberlain felt that ‘in order to avert the risk of war, it was essential to take the initiative to improve relations with Germany and Italy, and only thus could Britain’s potential commitments be brought into balance with its military aims’. Although Chamberlain had some support for his policy, he also received significant disapproval. Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, resigned in February of 1938 over Chamberlain’s appeasement policy and Lord Halifax, a supporter of Chamberlain’s views, took his place. Germany continued to arm.

Leaders in France also seemed to pursue an optimistic policy that contrasted with intelligence about Hitler’s aims. During the crisis, the long-serving French ambassador to Berlin,

---

Francois-Poncet, had ‘provided ample evidence’ that Hitler’s ‘immediate objective went beyond self-determination. However, there is no indication that his penetrating observations had the least influence on French policy.’  

Chamberlain’s rather particular views were apparent in a number of areas. He strongly resisted entering into negotiations with Russia, which he distrusted, and which he anyway saw as weak after Stalin’s purges of the Red Army. It would become, nevertheless, essential to cooperate with them in order to construct a credible alliance against Germany. Chamberlain became totally isolated within the cabinet on this issue. He eventually gave in, but negotiations never managed to forestall the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact signed on 23 August the following year, which would shock the world. More important, perhaps, was that Chamberlain saw it as something of a personal goal to prevent another war from happening under his watch. He had been deeply affected by the First World War and was determined that such a calamity should not happen again. When German-Czech talks to resolve Hitler’s demands failed in the summer of 1938, Chamberlain took it upon himself in ‘a dramatic personal initiative’ to go to Germany to meet Hitler, at Berchtesgaden. This decision was made without consulting the Cabinet. At the meeting he and Hitler arranged for the potential separation of the Sudetenland. On 22 September the Prime Minister travelled to Germany again, this time to Godesberg, in order – it was thought – to simply confirm details. But Hitler now demanded more – a military occupation of the German-speaking region. Chamberlain considered granting even this, but the British cabinet rejected any such terms. Conflict now seemed likely, and much of Europe expected it. However, at the brink of war, Hitler was prompted by Mussolini to invite Chamberlain and Daladier to a new conference, at Munich. At this now famous meeting, Chamberlain was able to claim a triumph because he attained some minor concessions from Hitler. In addition, Chamberlain was able to get Hitler to sign a legendary piece of white paper – a declaration that Britain and Germany would never go to war.

The following year – on 14-15 March 1939 – Czechoslovakia proper would be invaded by German forces. The Czech President, Benes, notified his government not to resist the German invasion, seeing only disaster should they do so. He was painfully aware that they could not prevent the German occupation without Allied assistance. Churchill, though not yet himself in power, contemplated sending Benes a telegram saying, ‘Fire your cannons, and all will be well.’ We will never know for sure whether the Allies really would have intervened at that stage should Czechoslovakia have put up resistance. Either way, Chamberlain became a symbol of the world’s lesson never to appease aggression.

---

10 Ibid., p. 153.
13 The history of the Munich crisis is somewhat impoverished because Chamberlain died a month after leaving office in 1940, so we do not have a detailed record of his perceptions of what happened, nor did Chamberlain have the chance to defend his actions for history. As Churchill once said, history is kind to those who write it.
Britain: Positive Illusions?

Earlier on during the 1930s, there had actually been some evidence of military optimism. Much of the debate centred on the economic and production capacities of the potential opponents in a European war, rather than on the military balance *per se*. Even after the rigours of WW I, the British Empire remained an economic giant, and it was thought that this would assure and fuel its superior might. Until 1937 at least, the leading British economist, John Maynard Keynes, had been fairly confident that Britain would maintain superiority. ‘At present, perhaps, and in two or three years most certainly, Great Britain will possess a far greater preponderance of sea power in European waters than she has ever possessed in her history. I believe that our navy is not afraid of attack from the air. Germany has no navy at all, and, practically speaking, Italy has none.’

At that stage, he also estimated that should it come to war, ‘I should expect that Czecho-Slovakia could give a pretty good account of herself, even if she is left entirely unsupported.’

By the time of Munich, however, Germany had significantly re-armed. The relative weakness of British power was fully recognised by the key decision-makers. The Armed Services Chiefs of Staff warned Chamberlain just before the conference that ‘to take offensive action’ until there had been a chance to organize ‘would be to place ourselves in the position of a man who attacks a tiger before he has loaded his gun.’ Chamberlain himself warned that ‘we must not precipitate a conflict now – we shall be smashed.’ This information was acted upon in subsequent policy preferences for peace:

> ‘British interests with respect to Czechoslovakia were examined systematically by the Cabinet Foreign Policy Committee shortly after the Anschluss [with Austria] This followed a series of earlier assessments which emphasised the constraints of Britain’s limited military power. Even fully rearmed, Britain could not secure the Empire against three major powers, and until 1939 there was no adequate air defence. There was no confidence in any potential ally, but Britain would have to support France against attack by Germany.’

If anything, British decision-makers seriously discounted the degree to which their own power might deter Hitler. Indeed, in the years before WW II, Britain may have ‘deterred itself’ by an erroneous fear throughout the 1930s that the Germans would want, and be able, to use air power to ‘wipe out London at the start of a world war.’ The estimated bomb damage was in reality over-estimated on account of out-of-date data. At the time, the view nevertheless persisted because it corroborated existing beliefs, and these beliefs were never reviewed. Chamberlain said that ‘we cannot expose ourselves now to a German attack. We simply commit suicide if we do.

---


18 Ibid., p. 149.

At no time could we stand up against German air bombing.\textsuperscript{20} British leaders were also mistaken in thinking that Germany had either the intention, or the capability, to bomb British cities in the first place. Neither was true: the Luftwaffe had been developed primarily to support ground forces and there were no plans for air raids (the enormous onslaught during the Battle of Britain in 1940 had not been planned, and the air power to do it ‘was an improvised one’).\textsuperscript{21}

If these misinterpretations of German intentions were not bad enough the British also exaggerated German air strength. This misperception seemed to become fixed because it fitted the pre-conceived notions of both ‘appeasers’ and ‘non-appeasers’ within Britain. For the former, it demonstrated that the costs of war would be very high, and should therefore be avoided; for the latter, it demonstrated that the larger the Luftwaffe, the more aggressive Germany had manifestly become and therefore the more the RAF must be built up to oppose it. This convergence of data reinforcing both opposing beliefs amplified and sustained the misperception. As a result, the British ‘did much of Hitler’s work for him. While he did seek to deter Britain, the British perceptions cannot be completely explained by the German behaviour. British fantasies, developed by different groups for different reasons, inhibited accurate analysis of the German air threat and led decision-makers to accept pessimistic views.’\textsuperscript{22} Overall, these bizarre circumstances led to an elimination (or prevention) of any positive illusions.

By the time of Munich, therefore, while it cannot be said that Chamberlain or other key decision-makers harboured any positive illusions about British capabilities (if anything these assessments falsely inflated the threat), he seriously under-estimated Hitler’s wider intentions. In contrast to widespread public and elite opinion preferring deterrence, Chamberlain maintained this unduly rosy view in the face of mounting evidence against the notion that Hitler had only limited aims and intentions. ‘Throughout the crisis and after it Chamberlain continued to believe that his strategy of appeasement was succeeding. He did this by interpreting evidence to fit his preconceptions and by either ignoring directly negative evidence or discrediting its source.’\textsuperscript{23} Following Munich, Chamberlain’s public statements became ‘increasingly optimistic.’\textsuperscript{24} Even after Hitler had marched into Prague the next year, on 15 March 1939, demonstrating beyond doubt that Hitler was not solely righting the wrongs of Versailles or seeking self-determination of German speaking people, Chamberlain ‘seemed at first unwilling to accept that his policy of “appeasement” had run its course and failed.’ Halifax, who had by and large supported him up to now, began to diverge from the Prime Minister’s views at this point.

Are we being fair to Chamberlain by characterizing his appeasement policy as over-optimistic? The bulk of the historical evidence and the significant resistance at the time suggests that it was unrealistic, but it should perhaps not be overstated because there were some arguments for pursuing it. James Richardson points out that, in fairness to Chamberlain, appeasement could (at least at the time) be argued to be a worthwhile a gamble if it might avoid war. Rather than

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item Ibid., p. 17.
\end{thebibliography}
British decision-makers misperceiving Hitler’s ‘larger intentions,’ he suggests that policy was ‘premised on uncertainty,’ and that as long as the uncertainty remained, ‘they would refrain from any step which they believed would heighten the risk of an otherwise avoidable war.’ Even so, Richardson concurs that ‘neither side correctly perceived the other’s specific intentions.’ Chamberlain was ‘satisfied that Herr Hitler would not go back on his word once he had given it,’ and remained confident that Hitler’s objective was ‘racial unity, and not the domination of Europe.’

John Mearsheimer, who generally sees appeasement as a disastrous strategy, notes that Munich was ‘the only case I know’ in which appeasement may have been justified – to buy time to arm. This was, he argues, ‘in part because British policymakers believed that the balance of power favoured the Third Reich but that it would shift in favor of the United Kingdom and France over time.’ Hence, Chamberlain might have been right to use appeasement as a stalling tactic. However, Stephen Walker’s in depth analyses of Chamberlain’s and other decision-makers’ beliefs demonstrate that the conviction in appeasement was real, not staged to buy time. According to other authors too, this ‘breathing space’ argument was certainly ‘not one used by Chamberlain at the time. There is no reference to it in his personal papers at Birmingham University because Chamberlain was convinced that an understanding with Germany was possible. He continued to believe this until March 1939 and even beyond it.’

GERMANY

Germany: Information and Reaction

Before the outbreak of World War II, the German military intelligence capability was one of the best in the world. Hitler was constantly interested in new assessments of potential opponents. He received ‘abundant, if not necessarily correct, information from the cumulative effects of the routine information flow as well as from digests of the foreign press and excerpts from wire services. “There has probably never been a head of government,” his press chief wrote later,
“who was so swiftly informed on public opinion throughout the world as Hitler”. \(^{30}\) There were problems in Hitler’s idiosyncratic use of this intelligence, his authoritarian decision-making process, and a counter-productive competition among his intelligence agencies vying for access to his attention. Nevertheless, enough good information filtered through to assess grand strategic decisions such as whether or not to initiate a war. Indeed, the available information was good enough to stimulate vigorous opposition from many of Hitler’s own advisors and generals. This is all the more significant given that the nature of his regime, and of his intelligence agencies, selected for information conducive to pleasing Hitler.

The main problem was that he did not know who his opponents would eventually be. The Allies were not yet bound to each other, and the status of Britain, Russia and the United States remained unclear. Thus, even if intelligence was relatively good, there remained a fundamental problem in evaluating the as yet undeclared enemies that Germany would have to fight.

Crucial to the argument in this chapter is that, at least before the war began, Hitler acted rather rationally. Even though his overall strategy was hugely ambitious throughout, his pre-war diplomacy constantly adapted to changing circumstances and was updated on the basis of new information. For example, over one weekend May 1938, Britain and France issued warnings to Germany in response to reports of large-scale troop movements near the Czech border in Saxony. In fact, these were military exercises and Hitler was apparently surprised at the challenge. Nevertheless, at that time the German military was still the weaker side and ‘the Wehrmacht was not yet ready to meet the British-French-Czech challenge.’ \(^{31}\) Hitler recognised this threat and withdrew German forces from the area.

Later that year, Hitler firmly wanted to launch a military offensive against Czechoslovakia – partly because he wanted to avenge his humiliation at the ‘weekend crisis’ in May. However, Hitler’s advisors argued against invading Czechoslovakia because of the continued likelihood of a German defeat. In a meeting on 20 June 1938, an advisor pointed out to Hitler that ‘if they were to immediately attack Czechoslovakia, they would possibly invite a conflict with the British and the French that the German army could not withstand.’ \(^{32}\) This assessment appears to have been taken seriously. Over the ensuing months too, evaluations of a likely German defeat clearly entered into Hitler’s decisions. Later that summer, in the run-up to Munich, ‘it seemed that Hitler was hesitating himself about the course of action to follow, because on 30 August the same state secretary produced similar advice for the foreign minister ... He again stated that an invasion of Czechoslovakia would make the western powers their enemies and would consequently lead to a European war, which would sooner or later lead to German capitulation.’ \(^{33}\) Thus, in 1938, German decision-making was adequately updated.

---


\(^{32}\) Gallhofer, I.N. and W.E. Saris (1996) *Foreign Policy Decision-Making: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Political Argumentation* Praeger, Westport, CT, p. 74. The advisor was a State Secretary to the Foreign Ministry.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 75.
Munich – Blind Ambitions

Germany: Positive Illusions?

It is clear that Hitler’s great ambitions led to the crisis in the first place. However, Germany and Italy’s claims of military superiority were largely propaganda to bluff strength in a showy display of military hardware without having invested enough in ammunition, parts, or replacements. Mussolini was well aware of Italy’s weakness and ‘for all his public boastings, he knew the military and political fragility of Italy better than anyone. He was willing to talk about a war in 1942, if Germany would give him the munitions; but in 1939 – No!’ Even so, Mussolini also seems to have held inflated views of Italian capabilities even beyond the level of weakness that he did recognise, and A.J.P. Taylor suggested that the continued conscious bluffing strategy, all very deliberate at first, eventually began to deceive Mussolini himself. Hitler’s public self-confidence at this stage also appeared to have an element of self-delusion:

‘The German military machinery, which emphasized rearmament in “width” rather than “depth,” was adequate in the pre-war period to further Hitler’s coercive diplomacy. But Hitler’s obsession with this type of showy rearmament was to have negative results once war began. As late as 1939, when informed that ammunition stocks were extremely low, Hitler replied, “Nobody inquires whether I have any bombs or ammo, it is the number of aircraft and guns that counts”.’

During the crisis over the Sudetenland, therefore, ‘while the German economy was geared to war, it was not geared for war.’ Whether or not their bluffs worked as a threat to other states, both fascist leaders, for all their later extremes, were at the time of Munich aware – or made aware – of the great powers that would oppose them and had limited positive illusions at this stage that they could defeat them militarily. Hence, it seems that the absence of military confidence was crucial to peace. Indeed, it was Mussolini that persuaded Hitler to invite Chamberlain and Daladier to Munich to negotiate.

Hitler’s planning was, at least initially, conducted along with his generals and the principal intelligence information was openly discussed. At these times, the German decision-

---

35 Mussolini ‘was deluded and led himself astray by the shows he put on. As he looked at these masses of marching troops shown to him on the screen, he really believed that Italy had an army of five million. The actual figure was not much more than a million when it came to the point. The five million was a phrase he had once used; he used it so often, it got into his own head. In exactly the same way, he came to believe that Italy had the most powerful navy in the Mediterranean.’ Taylor, A.J.P. (1977) The War Lords Penguin, London, p. 21
37 Ibid., p. 101. Hitler’s tactic of deception was the reverse of certain views held in Britain. Some British leaders thought it would be better to avoid building up armaments in order to mask the number that they potentially could have in reality. Britain’s great ‘economic stability’ was seen to cause ‘other countries to rate our power of resistance at something far more formidable than is implied merely by the number of men of war, aeroplanes and battleships which we should have at our disposal immediately on the outbreak of war.’ Sir Thomas Inskip, Minister for Coordination of Defense. See Jervis, R. (1983) ‘Deterrence and Perception’ International Security 7: 3-30, p. 6. In other words, one could either build up masses of weapons at the expense of ammunition and parts, or build nothing and leave the opponent to guess at what formidable armies might be raised against them should they choose to attack.
making process benefited from other individuals’ views on the available intelligence, and Hitler’s plans were often not supported by his own generals and advisers. This rules out the possibility that Hitler’s early actions were simply good decisions based on poor information: On the contrary, the same information was interpreted by other key figures as reasons to hold back. This strongly implies that Hitler’s own views were towards the over-optimistic end of the spectrum. But before the war and certainly at the time of Munich, Hitler’s foreign policy was by no means a reflection of his schemes alone, indeed according to A.J.P. Taylor, it was also ‘that of his predecessors, of the professional diplomats at the foreign ministry, and indeed of virtually all Germans ... to free Germany from the restrictions of the peace treaty, to restore a great German army; and then to make Germany the greatest power in Europe from her natural weight.’

CONCLUSIONS

Allied Restraint: Did an Absence of Positive Illusions Contribute?

We saw above that there had been an initial confidence in the superior might of Britain. By 1939, however, the prevailing view had been significantly updated on the basis of Hitler’s changed behaviour, his openly expanded intentions, and much more powerful military. Churchill continuously lambasted Britain’s failure to arm fast enough. Keynes also complained that British preparations were ‘ludicrously feeble.’ He blamed the country’s leaders as responsible for the impending disaster and, notably, he implied that their confidence in attaining peace was based on illusory beliefs. Hence the quote at the beginning of this chapter, claiming that Chamberlain (among other officials) were ‘blind to what seems to others the most obvious aspects of the contemporary world. These simply do not reach them.’ This corresponds to the expectation that positive illusions are most prominent, and most influential, when they are self-deceptive: Chamberlain’s ‘blindness is an essential element in his strength. If he could see even a little, if he became even faintly cognisant of the turmoil of ideas and projects and schemes to save the country which are tormenting the rest of us, his superbly brazen self-confidence would be fatally impaired.’

It appears that Chamberlain’s positive illusions about Hitler’s intentions did indeed contribute to causing the Munich Crisis to arise in 1938, but a fear of German military strength stopped the Allies short of risking war at that point. Chamberlain himself recognised that ‘if we now possessed a superior force to Germany, we should probably be considering these proposals in a very different spirit.’ Between Munich and the outbreak of war in 1939, Chamberlain

40 Ibid., p. 499.
continued to try to find his illusive negotiated solution. After Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, German forces were strengthened even further by the seized Czech industry and materiel from their air force and army, and they no longer had to maintain strong defences on their southern border. While Hitler’s previous moves in Europe could be argued to have represented only ambiguous feedback against the appeasement strategy, this take-over shattered the agreement set out at Munich. Even for Chamberlain,’ John Merriman wrote, ‘this marked the end of illusions.’ In fact, any such illusions proved to persist still beyond that, and Walker’s analysis of this event highlighted how Chamberlain’s beliefs remained ‘resistant even to a strong and very incongruous stimulus’ that caused others to change their beliefs. Even after the invasion of Poland, Chamberlain spent 2 September trying to arrange a separate peace with Germany. By this time few people could twist the evidence to support such optimistic hopes. As Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary on the day of the invasion of Poland, ‘Still the foreign press talk of a settlement. But that is just illusory.’ Up until then, Chamberlain had entertained the chances of peace against all the available evidence. Britain persisted in its appeasement strategy despite repeated evidence that suggested it was failing.

It is perhaps interesting to note that, at 68, Chamberlain was one of the oldest Prime Ministers in recent times, and he once declared in 1919 that he was ‘not looking foward to a parliamentary life; somehow I seem to have got too old for much in the way of personal ambition.’ His premiership was largely accidental; the sudden fall of the Lloyd George coalition in October 1922 left an open field for Chamberlain’s party in which its leader, Andrew Bonar Law, was bound ‘to promote a number of figures from the ranks of obscurity.’ In other words, Chamberlain was unusual in being relatively old, not greatly ambitious, and not subject to the usual selection processes that grinds out leaders from the rest. It is possible, therefore, that he did not hold the confidence typical of other leaders, and this contributed to his pacific policies and unwillingness to provoke conflict.

**German Restraint: Did an Absence of Positive Illusions Contribute?**

Hitler’s great strategic ambitions and bellicose posturing contributed to pushing the stakes as far as a crisis in the first place – both he and others held a belief that this aggressive tactic would be successful. According to Richardson, in the course of the Munich crisis, there was ‘a measure of

---

wishful thinking in long-term expectations both of Hitler and his critics.\textsuperscript{48} But while this optimism may have led to crisis, any illusions about their opponents stopped short of believing in an easy military success. Most of those around Hitler, many of whom did not share his views, generally agreed that Germany would lose an armed confrontation fought in 1938.\textsuperscript{49} Hitler was thus relatively well advised at this point, and he listened to and acted on this advice.

Positive illusions on both sides may have contributed to the European powers careering into the 1938 crisis. The leaders were not alone in their views, but the evidence did argue against their policies to many factions in both countries. Hitler’s ‘bold foreign policy gambles – the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, Anschluss with Austria, Munich and the destruction of Czechoslovakia – were consistently opposed by his generals and greeted with apprehension by the German people.’\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, factions of the German military even attempted to warn the British of Hitler’s larger intentions twice in 1938 and again in 1939, in the hope that they could forestall an over-ambitious war by diplomatic means. Despite considerable domestic opposition on the British side as well, Chamberlain allowed Hitler to become significantly emboldened and to appropriate important material resources. ‘Advice on the relative advantages of fighting now or later was sought very late and was little discussed.’\textsuperscript{51}

However, once these risky strategies by both Hitler and Chamberlain had accelerated them to the edge of war, a sharp reassessment of military capabilities left both sides fearful of the other, and war was avoided. Hitler did not hold positive illusions that the Allies would be easily fought and defeated at this stage (or if he did, his advisers managed to prevent this belief from being translated into policy). Neither did Britain entertain positive illusions that they could, at that time, fight a successful war against Germany. ‘Germany was not yet prepared for major war and Britain, having undertaken a systematic assessment of its interests and options, made a sustained effort to avoid a confrontation.’\textsuperscript{52}

The most compelling evidence of positive illusions in this case was not in estimates of force strengths or probability of winning, but rather positive illusions about the opponent’s intentions. This is a theme that I return to in the other case studies. Richardson’s study of seven Great Power crises since the mid-nineteenth century concluded that misperceptions of military capability were responsible for only one of these (Russia opting for war with Japan in 1903). However, he found misperception of intentions to be a factor in exacerbating all of them, and a very significant factor in three.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 135. Richardson's italics.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., see pp. 267-271. Those three were: The Crimean War Crisis (1853-1854), the Russo-Japanese Crisis (1903-1904) and, not least, the Sudeten Crisis of 1938.
WHY WAR IN 1939?

Having concluded that at the time of Munich an absence of positive illusions led to peace, rather than war, we have the opportunity to examine the prediction that positive illusions were in evidence when war did eventually break out in 1939. I will show precisely this. In the intervening period, Hitler’s grand strategic objectives became more important, he became significantly emboldened by his series of successes, and he increasingly mistrusted his own intelligence agencies and advisers – thereby gradually unharnessing his greater ambitions. Most of all, he under-estimated the Allies will to fight, and over-estimated his ability to defeat them if they did. Hitler said in August 1939, ‘any political or military success involves taking risks ... The men of Munich will not take the risk.’54 But before providing evidence for this process on the side of Germany, were there any increasing positive illusions on the allied side?

Allies: Positive Illusions by 1939?

Some possible elements of positive illusions on the Allied side may have contributed to the decision for war. For example, France harboured a certain complacency about its defence against the German invasion. The Maginot line was not expected to fall, certainly not as quickly as it did, and the French discounted the possibility that the Germans would be able to launch an attack through the Ardennes, which is exactly what happened.55 But overall, the Allies cannot be said to have been overtly over-optimistic about victory. By 1939, any Allied illusions about Hitler’s intentions were clearly shattered, and Britain was faced without much choice but to meet the earlier ultimatum to Germany. But in terms of military capabilities, the Allies were, if anything, more pessimistic than they needed to be, and ‘did not know the deep anxieties which rent their [the German] High Command.’ 56 However, if anything, this fact makes the Allied decision to go to war in 1939 all the more significant. Despite the great odds against them, which they perceived to be even greater than was really the case, they were still willing to fight and, if one is to believe Churchill and many others, to believe that they would eventually win. It is important to remember that, at this stage, Britain was not necessarily bound to fight.

Churchill was to believe in victory from the first day of the war until the last. His recollections of the House of Commons debate at the outbreak of the war suggest a deep optimism about what was to come, and that this optimism was, in fact, at odds with the current assessments of Britain’s material capabilities:

‘As I sat in my place, listening to the speeches, a very strong sense of calm came over me, after the intense passions and excitements of the last few days. I felt a serenity of mind and was conscious of a kind of uplifted detachment from human and personal affairs. The glory

of Old England, peace-loving and ill-prepared as she was, but instant and fearless at the call
of honour, thrilled my being and seemed to lift our fate to those spheres far removed from
earthly facts and physical sensation.'\textsuperscript{57}

The point at which Britain certainly did display a certain optimism, was in its decision not to
yield or seek peace in 1940 \textit{after} the fall of France.\textsuperscript{58} At that point, neither the US nor Russia had
entered the war. Britain, alone in Europe, remained determined to fight a protracted war with a
formidable enemy, despite a risk of invasion should it do so, and fought ferociously from its
knees in the Battle of Britain.

\textbf{Germany: Positive Illusions by 1939?}

Hitler’s chain of victories before the war (remilitarizing the Rhineland, \textit{Anschluss} with Austria,
Munich, the seizure of Czechoslovakia), often in the face of considerable domestic opposition,
appear to have influenced Hitler’s subsequent behaviour. ‘With each victory he saw even less
reason to heed advice or admit mistakes,’\textsuperscript{59} and a growing sense of omniscience made him
‘increasingly resistant to new or contrary information.’\textsuperscript{60} All of this was in spite of the
considerable intelligence capability that surrounded him, or even perhaps because of it (Hitler
mistrusted his own intelligence agencies).\textsuperscript{61} David Jablonksy argues that Hitler ‘was not generally
inclined to relate his own calculations to the probable intentions and capabilities of the enemy,
since he was convinced that his will would always be triumphant in the end.’

\textit{Decreasing Openness}

The fact that these flaws increased as time went on is significant for the theory of this thesis,
because it supports the prediction that the debate became progressively closed, such that Hitler’s
over-confidence, while restrained by advice in 1938, was much more unimpeded by 1939. This
was exacerbated by several problems in the Reich’s processing of information that ‘enhanced the
likelihood of unrealistic intelligence and threat assessments.’\textsuperscript{62} First, Hitler eliminated important
roles that normally existed to scrutinize plans or confirm consensus. For example, in 1938, Hitler
abolished the position of War Minister who, until then, had taken all the major strategic
decisions, and he himself became the head of all three services.\textsuperscript{63}

Second, Hitler’s method of government created a system in which various organisations
had incentives to compete for access to his attention: ‘co-operation in the field of intelligence
among Nazi decision-makers was virtually non-existent, since control of intelligence assessments

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 320. This description is from 3 September 1939, in the House of Commons.
\textsuperscript{58} Jablonsky, D. (1989) ‘The Paradox of Duality: Adolf Hitler and the Concept of Military Surprise’ In \textit{Leaders and
\textsuperscript{60} Jablonsky, D. (1989) ‘The Paradox of Duality: Adolf Hitler and the Concept of Military Surprise’ In \textit{Leaders and
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 73. My italics.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 75.
meant access to Hitler, and such access meant power ... The consequences of all this was a perversion of the meaning of intelligence.'

Hitler himself created significant motives to provide pleasing assessments. At the beginning of the campaign in Russia, for instance, Hitler’s belief in victory was ‘reinforced by the OKW leadership confident of its own ability and anxious not to repeat the pessimistic enemy over-estimations of previous years that had brought Hitler’s wrath down on the General Staff.’

Third, Hitler gradually surrounded himself with an ‘ever-narrowing inner staff circle’ which ‘protected him from unwelcome information.’ Field Marshal Keitel in particular ‘set new standards for obsequious servility’ (and came to be know as the ‘nodding ass’). Later attempts to remove Keitel were rejected by Hitler on the grounds that he was as ‘loyal as a dog.’

Fourth, even when good information got through these barriers to Hitler, he would treat it with extreme prejudice. ‘Hitler’s character, working habits, and experience combined to make him the worst possible intelligence consumer. His sense of infallibility made him completely unreceptive to different, let alone contradictory, ideas ... Belief in his own superiority left no room to learn anything from experience.’ In summary, positive illusions were increasingly left unchallenged, and therefore largely uncorrected:

‘When Hitler finally unleashed his forces on Poland on the morning of September 1, 1939, there was no celebration in the streets of Berlin, only the stony silence of fear and uncertainty. Hitler was popular, but war was not. A leader who took the counsel of others or who paid heed to public opinion would not have conducted policy in quite the same way.’

**Increasing Positive Illusions**

In the decision to risk war in 1939, Hitler was certainly over-optimistic about how the Allies would respond. In the run up to the invasion of Poland, General Halder wrote that Hitler ‘reckons with the possibility that the French and British might adopt a passive attitude in the face of our invasion.’ Even if they were to fight, Hitler expected that Britain and France would ‘fight in September 1939 but doubted that they would continue to do so after Poland was defeated. Britain

---


65 Ibid., p. 77. OKW is the ‘Oberkommando der Wehrmacht,’ a joint armed forces authority established in 1938.

66 Ibid., p. 74.

67 Certainly, people like Keitel would have a direct effect on those wishing to report unbiased information to Hitler. For example, as the battle for Stalingrad spiralled towards disaster, a Panzer division captain travelled to a headquarters meeting to make a bold briefing of the realities to Hitler. Keitel warned him not to present these facts, but the officer went ahead – with Keitel shaking his fist at him from behind Hitler in the audience Beevor, A. (1998) *Stalingrad* Penguin, London. It is not difficult to imagine the deterrent effect that a Field Marshall would have on junior officers in such situations.


especially, he believed, had sufficient common interest with Germany to conclude a peace treaty after limited hostilities.\textsuperscript{72} These expectations were further evident following the war in Poland. ‘Hitler seems to have assumed that the British and French – who had done nothing to help Poland, could not do anything to help her – would fold up.’\textsuperscript{73} Even \textit{after} France had also fallen, most remarkably, ‘it never crossed Hitler’s mind that Great Britain would continue the war.’\textsuperscript{74} Shortly before the outbreak of war in 1939, Hitler drew together his Chiefs of Staff to inform them of plans to invade Poland. ‘After the Führer’s speech, only Minister Goering seemed to have applauded this decision enthusiastically. The other members of the meeting preferred to keep silent ... On September 3 Britain and France declared war on Germany, a possibility that Hitler had severely underestimated.’\textsuperscript{75}

Hitler himself, who once ‘confessed to a compulsion to go against the odds and court disaster,’ was certainly encouraged to spark the war in 1939 because he \textit{under}-estimated the resolve of the Allied powers to fight at all.\textsuperscript{76} In addition, if they should fight, he severely \textit{over}-estimated the capability of the German military to defeat them. Hitler had enormous positive illusions about the ease of defeating what were, to him, inherently inferior foes. He believed that the Slavs and other ‘mongrelized’ groups would not fight well, and this underlay ‘a consistent underestimation of his most powerful adversaries, the United States and the Soviet Union.’\textsuperscript{77} In 1941, Hitler would ‘confidently assert that if the United States were to work feverishly for four years, it could not replace the material that the Russian Army had lost thus far. This underestimation was not limited to production and supply capability. “I’ll never believe,” Hitler stated shortly after Pearl Harbour, “that an American soldier can fight like a hero”.’ This conviction was contrary to clear evidence indicating otherwise, and contrary to the advice of many of his own generals and advisors. Both this, and his decision to invade Russia in 1941, represent hugely optimistic decisions – as judged by others at the time (on both sides), by historians of the period, and by history.

Hitler’s aggression and boldness paid off earlier on, as his remarkable victories in Norway, Crete and Gibraltar showed. But at the strategic level, his optimism failed him. By opening up several fronts simultaneously, the rapid victories that he achieved at certain points were undermined by the major commitments leading in all directions from Germany. In the end, his over-confidence brought disaster. ‘Because Hitler’s strategic ends were infinitely expansive, no military doctrine … could keep up with his policy in the end.’\textsuperscript{78}

It is worth noting that great confidence was not limited to Hitler. Erwin Rommel, for instance, gained his formidable reputation in North Africa for his daring attacks with sometimes vastly inferior forces. Von Manstein suggested that ‘The German method is really rooted in the

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 49.
\textsuperscript{75} Gallhofer, I.N. and W.E. Saris (1996) \textit{Foreign Policy Decision-Making: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Political Argumentation} Praeger, Westport, CT, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 77.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.p. 101.
German character, which – contrary to all the nonsense about “blind obedience” – has a strong streak of individuality and – possibly as part of its Germanic heritage – finds certain pleasure in taking risks.\(^79\) After the rapid successes in the invasion of France in 1940, it was Hitler that proved to be reluctant to take further risks and decided to ‘pull the reins’ on his generals – who themselves advocated a rapid onward push to consolidate the success and exploit the confusion.\(^80\)

Once the invasion of France was underway and spectacular successes had been achieved, General Franz Halder wrote in his diary on 17 May 1940 that ‘on top there isn’t a spark of spirit that would dare to put high stakes on a single throw.’\(^81\)

**Ever Increasing Positive Illusions**

What is most striking is the difference in Hitler’s beliefs between the time of the campaign in France to that in Russia. Each event illustrates an increasing degree of Hitler’s positive illusions, and a decreasing ability of the system to counter the attendant manifestations of over-confidence. Hitler’s proposal to launch the invasion of France as early as 12 November 1939 was successfully postponed because ‘there was such strong opposition by nearly all the senior army generals.’\(^82\)

But increasingly, Hitler ‘insisted over his generals’ objections in the fall of 1939 that the *drole de guerre* must be broken by offensive action.\(^83\) Eventually he cajoled them to ‘agree’ on the invasion. Once the enormous initial successes of the campaign had been witnessed, however, Hitler was able to adopt an I-told-you-so position and make plans for future action even ‘against the wishes of most military leaders who wished to wait until the enemy reaction could be gauged.’\(^84\)

Hitler’s subsequent decision to invade Russia illustrates a newly elevated level of confidence.\(^85\) His generals had managed to convince him that the weather conditions and the vast logistic requirements made an attack on Russia totally impractical in 1940. But after the victory over France, Hitler told Keitel that ‘a campaign against Russia would be like a child’s game in a sandbox by comparison.’\(^86\) Thus, in 1941 Hitler launched his ‘suicidal assault’ against Russia, ‘counting blindly on an early victory.’\(^87\) A.J.P Taylor believes that Hitler’s staggering success in France was the reason his generals did not oppose his move into the East. Rather, they ‘accepted

---

\(^{79}\) Ibid., p. 94.
\(^{80}\) Ibid., See pp. 92 – 95.
\(^{81}\) Ibid., p. 94.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., p. 66.
\(^{85}\) Hingley, R. (1991) *Russia: A Concise History* Thomas and Hudson, London ‘Hitler’s major strategic error was a failure to perceive the overriding import of Moscow as a prime target, and a tendency to dissipate his efforts against other goals which included Leningrad, Stalingrad and Caucasus oil. He also tended (as Stalin did too) to insist on his troops clinging to conquered territory at all costs, even when tactical considerations made local retreat seem imperative to generals on the spot. Such mistakes helped to render superior German generalship ultimately ineffective.’ See p. 186-187.
he could do something similar against Russia. But again it was not solely Hitler that had entertained this optimism. Many German generals ‘grossly underestimated Russia’s resources, manpower and fighting capacity. They agreed with Hitler that Russia would collapse within a month of the invasion.’ Their over-confidence is witnessed by the fact that, ‘whereas against France the generals made detailed plans, no defined plans were made of what they would do when they got into Russia. They were confident that they would simply break through in one place after another, and the Russian armies would all surrender; in July the war would be over.’

German over-confidence was also betrayed by many of the facts of the campaign strategy and planning. For example, winter supplies were not even given to the troops. Once the winter set in and the German forces came to a standstill, Hitler seems to have been surprised how poorly equipped the German forces were and what a disastrous state they were in. Taylor wrote that ‘the whole German invasion was conducted in such a slapdash way that, when the time came, in June 1941, a great deal of it was not ready. Slightly over half the German invading forces had to be supplied from French captured equipment.’

Even by the time of the devastating Russian winter offensive of 1942, Hitler maintained extraordinary positive illusions about the disastrous predicament the German army was in, dismissing negative reports and bullying his subordinates to push on regardless. Hitler complained that his generals ‘always overestimate the strength of the Russians ... They are weakened ... besides, how badly Russian officers are trained! No offensive can be organized with such officers ... In the short or long run the Russians will simply come to a halt. They’ll run down. Meanwhile we shall throw in a few fresh divisions; that will put things right.’

**War Provoked by Positive Illusions about Capabilities, Not about Intentions**

In this case study, there was evidence of positive illusions about both intentions and capabilities. Both may lead to war, but it is crucial to point out that the causal mechanism for each is different. The thesis’s central thesis was supported — assessments of capability in 1938 were realistic (or even pessimistic), and hence neither side was willing to risk war. But positive illusions about intentions, though aggravating the crisis, cannot be claimed to have directly increased the probability of war. Here is why. Positive illusions about intentions were arguably evident on both sides at the time of Munich and at the time of the crisis over Poland in 1939. Yet, while the first event resulted in peace, the second resulted in war. Since both leaders shared illusions about intentions but this led to peace in one case and war in the other, illusions about intentions are

---

89 Ibid., p. 54.
ruled out as a causal determinant of war. Instead, the implication is that positive illusions about *capabilities* was the more significant factor influencing the probability of war. Of the factors considered here, only that changed from 1938 to 1939 (on Hitler’s side). This means that the core theory is strengthened – it is positive misperceptions of *power* that leads to war. Finally, this case illustrates most clearly that positive illusions can arise on one side only and still have a causal impact on war. The opponent may not choose war, but be forced to fight anyway.
Chapter VI – The Cuban Missile Crisis

Resolve on the Brink

No student of Soviet affairs has suggested that Khrushchev was a prudent man. He was attracted to grand gestures and acted impulsively. He gambled, often with little apparent chance of success. Cuba fits this pattern of behaviour.

Richard Ned Lebow ¹

I’m a pessimist, Mr. President … We’ve changed our evaluations.

General Maxwell D. Taylor ²
Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

The Cuban Missile Crisis offers another demanding test of the positive illusions hypothesis because they should have been minimal for the following reasons (summarized in Table 6.1). The Soviet decision to deploy missiles in Cuba should have been unaffected by positive illusions because, first, the opportunity for assessment of the situation was long. Second, alternative options were available. Third, the likely U.S. reaction had been made clear. Likewise, the U.S. decision to respond should have been unaffected by positive illusions because, first, while the opportunity for assessment was short, the intense debate within the specially formed Executive Committee (‘ExCom’) was a high-quality decision-making process (and widely vaunted ever since). Second, a number of alternative options were available to Kennedy (domestic pressures compelled some sort of action, but a diversity of possibilities remained). Third, U.S. intelligence

information, though later found to have been flawed in certain important respects, was good enough to rank the stakes of the key available options.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is also a challenge for the positive illusions hypothesis because it is perhaps the most deeply studied crisis in international politics, with numerous existing explanations for the moves made on each side.

Despite the above, I argue that the Soviet Premiere, Nikita Khrushchev, exhibited positive illusions in trying to install missiles in Cuba, against clear evidence that it would not be tolerated by the U.S. Any positive illusions on the U.S. side, by contrast, appear to have been dispelled by the thorough ExCom decision-making process. Proponents of military action became pacified – enough at least to seek a peaceful solution – as a result of extensive debate about options and their likely ramifications. Those individuals that still preferred military action were overruled. As the risk of nuclear holocaust became a serious possibility (while both sides held firm, accidental engagements started to occur), any illusions Khrushchev had also seem to have disappeared and he sought peace, even at the considerable price of being seen to back down.

**Table 6.1** Elimination of basic alternative explanations for the Cuban Missile Crisis and overview of conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Soviet Union (missile deployment to Cuba)</th>
<th>United States (response to missile discovery)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elimination of basic alternatives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment opportunity</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Short but intense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative options</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information availability</td>
<td>Reasonable</td>
<td>Reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive illusions?</td>
<td>Yes (but not at end)</td>
<td>No*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main factor</td>
<td>Huge gamble against the odds (at end: Fear of holocaust)</td>
<td>ExCom deliberation and caution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some possible positive illusions about the effectiveness of the U.S. deterrence strategy
BACKGROUND

On 15 October 1962, a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft discovered Soviet Medium Range Ballistic Missile installations on Cuba. President Kennedy was briefed the following morning. These missiles had a range of around 1000 miles, and could easily reach Washington D.C. A few days later, Intercontinental Range Ballistic Missiles were also discovered, with a range of around 2000 miles and within range of nearly every major city in the United States. By installing missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev broke a public commitment as well as several official agreements, that he would do no such thing. The now famous Executive Committee of key U.S. policy makers and advisers was quickly assembled to deal with the crisis. On Monday 22 October, Kennedy publicly announced the discovery of the missiles in an address to the nation, along with the ExCom’s resolved course of action: A ‘quarantine’ was declared on all shipments of offensive weapons to Cuba – essentially a naval blockade that would stop and search all Russian ships. After a period of extreme tension in which the world reached its closest ever point to nuclear war, Khrushchev announced on 28 October that he would remove the missiles. Kennedy, in turn, pledged that the U.S. would stage no invasion of Cuba. In addition, in secret talks between Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, it was agreed that American Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be removed within five months. In this case study, I evaluate the Soviet decision to deploy missiles in Cuba, and the U.S. response to the crisis once the missiles had been discovered.

THE SOVIET UNION

The Soviet Union: Information and Reaction

There were two critical pieces of information that Khrushchev needed to know in deciding whether to install missiles in Cuba. First, he needed to know the relative nuclear capabilities of the U.S. and the USSR, to assess whether sneaking extra missiles into America’s ‘back yard’ was worth the risk. Second, he needed to know the likely U.S. response. Both of these were available to the Soviet Union at the time. The supposed superiority of Soviet strategic forces that Khrushchev had been publicising was false. In 1962 the U.S. had 17 times more nuclear

---

4 President Kennedy’s address to the nation noted that the installation of missiles contravened the Rio Pact of 1947 and contradicted official Soviet policy of not having, and having no intention to put, nuclear weapons in other nations. Indeed, the Soviet Union had issued a public statement on 11 September 1962 which specifically confirmed that ‘The Government of the Soviet Union authorised Tass to state that there is no need for the Soviet Union to shift its weapons for the repulsion of aggression, for a retaliatory blow, to any other country, for instance Cuba.’ See Ibid., p. 79.
warheads, and the decision-makers in Moscow were well aware of it.\footnote{Lebow, R.N. (1990) 'Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis' \textit{Diplomatic History} 14: 471-492, p. 482.} With hindsight ‘we know today that Khrushchev’s bellicose posturing was primarily designed to mask Soviet inferiority.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 481.} The U.S., however, were not initially aware that it was a bluff. ‘When Khrushchev took the offensive in Southeast Asia and Berlin, Kennedy assumed that it was the result of his belief in Soviet strategic superiority and his lack of respect for Kennedy’s resolve. Khrushchev’s repeated assertions that the “correlation of forces” increasingly favoured the Soviet Union appeared to confirm the first of these assumptions.’ In fact, Kennedy had exploited the supposed ‘missile gap’ in favour of the USSR in his election campaign, a deficiency that the democrats promised to rectify (even though it was soon shown to be incorrect once he got into office). Firstly then, the Soviets were well aware of the actual relative strengths of the strategic forces of the two sides. The U.S. was by far the more powerful, so missiles in Cuba with a first strike advantage might serve as a ‘quick means to strategic parity.’\footnote{Copeland, D.C. (2000) \textit{The Origins of Major War} Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, p. 190.} At the same time, however, Khrushchev knew that if it came to a crisis, as the far weaker power he would not be in a strong bargaining position – it was thus an especially risky option.

The second key piece of information for the Soviet decision to install nuclear missiles in Cuba was the likely U.S. response. Several sources available to the Soviet leadership indicated that such a move would never be tolerated by the U.S., and Kennedy had made this specifically clear in public.\footnote{Lebow, R.N. (1990) 'Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis' \textit{Diplomatic History} 14: 471-492.} It should also have been clear from a consideration of U.S. domestic politics, not just of Kennedy’s administration, that such a move would be denied – even at high cost. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko warned Khrushchev that ‘putting our nuclear missiles in Cuba would cause a political explosion in the United States.’\footnote{Stern, S.M. (2003) \textit{Averting the Final Failure: John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings} Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. 24.}

However, Khrushchev’s decisions did not seem to reflect an accurate use of this information. If his aim was simply to use the missiles as a bargaining chip, then the deployment could be defended as having a good chance of success and therefore perfectly rational (because ‘having to’ remove them might have been part of the ploy). Yet this was not the case. His principal aims were to create a defensive deterrent against an attack on Cuba (the U.S. had supported an attempt in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs, and another invasion was perceived as very likely), and to redress Soviet nuclear inferiority.\footnote{Lebow, R.N. (1990) 'Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis' \textit{Diplomatic History} 14: 471-492; Allison, G. and P. Zelikow (1999) \textit{Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis} Longman, New York; The bargaining chip thesis can be defended by invoking the fact that the Soviets did, in the end, gain a U.S. non-invasion pledge towards Cuba (and the removal of missiles in Turkey). But this had not been expected. Extending the crisis to try and extract these concessions massively increased the risk of a U.S. invasion of Cuba, rather than ensuring the converse. Even if using the missiles as a bargaining chip was an aim of Khrushchev’s, therefore, this was not the principal aim, so achieving permanent missile bases was still a crucial condition of the project’s utility.} The fact that both of these aims required permanent missile basis in Cuba betray his actions to be exceptionally optimistic. Khrushchev also appears to have been optimistic in banking on them not being discovered (he had intended to announce them as a \textit{fait accompli} once operational). Soviet missiles in Cuba were unlikely to be...
regarded by the U.S. or other world leaders as a simple mirror image of NATO missile deployments in Europe. Khrushchev appears to have over-estimated the chances that his plan would succeed, given the considerable counter information:

‘When deciding to go ahead with the deployment, Khrushchev had not considered the domestic political pressures that would make the missiles intolerable to Kennedy. Nor is there any evidence that he considered the important differences between [the U.S.] openly deploying missiles in Turkey and secretly installing them in Cuba after giving assurances to the contrary. I have previously argued, and knowledgeable Soviets now agree, that Khrushchev’s failure to grasp these realities and their implications was the result of anger and wishful thinking.’\(^\text{12}\)

**The Soviet Union: Positive Illusions?**

Kennedy was particularly concerned by the threatening behaviour in ‘Khrushchev’s bullying speeches, boasts of superiority, and crude displays of force.’\(^\text{13}\) This conscious bragging seemed to spill over into a genuine over-confidence in sending missiles to Cuba. Khrushchev ‘acted out of anger. His emotional arousal clouded his judgement and made empathy with President Kennedy and the constraints under which he operated all but impossible. It also ruled out a thorough and dispassionate evaluation of the likely repercussions of a Cuban missile deployment.’\(^\text{14}\) The alternative possibility that Khrushchev was just unwillingly heading an agenda pushed by a hard-line Soviet Presidium is not supported, given new documentary research on Soviet archives showing the decision to install missiles in Cuba was largely Khrushchev’s own: ‘To interpret Soviet decisions is to interpret Khrushchev. He alone decided on policy.’\(^\text{15}\) We can also reject the claim that Khrushchev simply viewed Kennedy as a pushover. Soviet documents indicate that Khrushchev’s provocations ‘were neither opportunity driven nor prompted by a lack of respect for Kennedy’s resolve.’\(^\text{16}\) Rather, it appears that contrary to available evidence, Khrushchev simply over-estimated the probability that the U.S. would tolerate Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba (and also that they would fail to discover them), even if that meant a superpower standoff. This claim is not particularly controversial, my point here is that it is consistent with positive illusions.\(^\text{17}\)

A closed decision-making process appears to have been instrumental in failing to thwart Khrushchev’s positive illusions. The Soviet leader ‘ underrated the risk of a firm U.S. response partly because he made his policy in dark secrecy, excluding advisors who could have predicted


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 481.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 490.


\(^{16}\) Lebow, R.N. (1990) 'Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis' *Diplomatic History* 14: 471-492, p. 480.

\(^{17}\) Richard Lebow argues clearly that Khrushchev underestimated the rapidity and firmness of the U.S. response. See Ibid.
Kennedy’s tough reaction … States tend to miscalculate because they make policy in a secret setting that excludes analysts who might correct their false premises.’ In this case it was an exceptionally secretive move; ‘not even all members of the Central Committee or the cabinet ministers were involved. It was only possible to discuss it within a circle of about ten or maybe fifteen people, not more.’ It is unclear who among them might have held positive illusions, but Khrushchev’s character certainly appears to have been particularly prone to them.

THE UNITED STATES

The U.S: Information and Reaction

U.S. intelligence resources and transmission to the White House were generally excellent at the time of the crisis. After Pearl Harbour, the U.S. had determined to establish the world’s best, biggest and well-resourced intelligence network, and they achieved this very rapidly. Indeed, it was the routine high-altitude U-2 photography and scrutiny – both massive and expensive efforts – that revealed the missiles in the first place. However, we now know that during the Cuban Missile Crisis the ‘intelligence provided to U.S. decision makers was substantially imperfect, whatever the intelligence community may have known.’ There were intelligence failures on two important facts relevant to U.S. response options: First, the CIA had estimated around 20,000 Soviet troops in Cuba, but it was later revealed that there were actually more than twice that number: 42,000. Second, much more important was the fact, only discovered some years later, that Soviet short-range tactical nuclear weapons (on surface-to-surface missiles) had already been installed on Cuba specifically as a defence against a U.S. ground invasion. Had the Americans attacked, it has been reasonably established that these could have been used. In addition, there was a large degree of uncertainty about the wider Soviet response to any attack on Cuba. This derived not so much from a lack of relevant information as from the intrinsic difficulty of second-guessing another state’s intentions. Where would they respond? How? With conventional or nuclear forces? This was simply not known for sure (the most commonly cited potential responses were a Soviet invasion or blockade of West Berlin, or a retaliatory strike against NATO missile bases in Turkey).

22 Greiner, B. (1990) 'The Cuban Missile Crisis Reconsidered. The Soviet View: An Interview with Sergo Mikoyan' Diplomatic History 14: 205-221. Sergo Mikoyan worked as a foreign ministry official and political secretary to his father, Anastas Mikoyan, who was First Deputy Prime Minister and second only to Khrushchev.
These key pieces of information would have had a significant impact on which options the U.S. perceived to be realistically available. Yet, when making their decisions about whether to take military action or not, the U.S. did not know any of them. Of course, all three unknowns luckily became irrelevant, since the U.S. did not invade anyway for a number of other reasons that argued against such a course of action. Therefore, for the purposes of the U.S. decision, the then-available information reaching the ExCom was apparently good enough to reveal the existing major disadvantages of a military attack, and thus good enough to make informed decisions about whether to order the preliminary air strikes or not.\(^{24}\) Having all the facts at the time would only have reinforced their actual decision to avoid military action, so our conclusions for this chapter would be unchanged.

Likewise, the fact that the U.S. had grossly exaggerated the number of ICBMs deployed at the time on Soviet soil (the supposed ‘missile gap’), is also irrelevant. The U.S. was becoming aware of the reality in 1961-62 (and said as much), but either way the decision to act militarily or peacefully over Cuba was not related to the number of missiles in the USSR. Equally, the fact that the Soviet missile deployment to Cuba was not predicted or discovered until very late can be argued to be a further U.S. intelligence failure, but that failure in itself did not have a bearing on the decision about whether to wage war or not once the discovery had actually occurred.

Intelligence problems later on during the crisis were more significant, and several crucial developments and events were not conveyed to decision-makers.\(^ {25}\) Perhaps the most critical such event was when a U-2 was shot down over Cuba at the height of the crisis, on 27 October. The U.S. believed that the senior Soviet leadership had authorized the firing of surface-to-air missiles (which were Russian made and manned). But this was not true. In reality, Khrushchev had been outraged when he learned that Soviet forces had shot the aircraft down.\(^ {26}\) The U.S. did not adequately consider potential misperceptions of their own actions by the Soviet side either. As the crisis unfolded, ‘there does not seem to have been much in the way of an ongoing intelligence assessment of what the Soviets would know about U.S. actions and intentions.’\(^ {27}\) For example, ‘the U.S. government had already developed plans and issued orders that, if a U-2 was shot down, a retaliatory air strike would be launched against offending air defense sites within minutes.’\(^ {28}\) When the U-2 actually was shot down, White House decision-makers had to directly intervene to control what could otherwise have been an automatic escalation. McNamara still pushed for a retaliatory strike at dawn the next day, but Kennedy resisted. Despite these near


\(^{26}\) The authority to fire SAMs had been delegated to Soviet field commanders. See Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*. See confirmation in Greiner, B. (1990) ‘The Cuban Missile Crisis Reconsidered. The Soviet View: An Interview with Sergo Mikoyan’ *Diplomatic History* 14: 205-221.


misses, information problems were gradually sorted out, and special links were set-up to allow
direct communication between political and military leaders.

Apart from problems with intelligence information itself, the analysis of information
during the crises is widely regarded as having been excellent, especially given the time pressure,
the enormous responsibility and the high degree of uncertainty. Given the extensive research
conducted on the taped conversations and other documents of the ExCom discussions, it is not
surprising that some have found inconsistencies and errors. For example, Gallhofer and Saris
found that despite at least seven ‘distinct strategies’ being floated, decision-makers tended only to
consider two at a time.29 But in general, the quality of expertise and debate within the ExCom
represented a decision-making phenomenon unprecedented in the history of foreign policy, and
one which is ‘widely regarded as being of high quality.’30

Compared to the typical decision-making tier in the U.S. government (within a similar
time-frame), the ExCom was significantly more diverse and thorough. Moreover, the group was
an essentially apolitical unit. Although the final decisions were Kennedy’s, domestic politics are
not likely to have seriously affected the ExCom’s deliberations because it ‘consisted of national
security officials and advisers, not politicians.’31 Such factors didn’t disappear altogether of
course, but nevertheless, ‘it was hardly the forum for Kennedy to air his domestic political
concerns. It seems more likely that he would have deliberately refrained from doing so to
courage his advisers to speak their minds freely and to evaluate their options solely with regard
to their security implications.’ Furthermore, members of the ExCom felt a shared duty to get the
missiles out of Cuba and that ‘this sense of responsibility, the resulting heightened sensitivity to
the risks of inadvertence, and the associated fear seem to have reinforced each other and to have
had a powerful cautionary effect on the ExCom’s choices of action throughout the crisis.’32

The U.S: Positive Illusions?

Initially, all the U.S. decision-makers ‘held one and only one opinion – that immediate military
action was necessary.’33 As the debate continued, some would become more dovish, while others
would remain ardent hawks, but what is critical here is the expectations of the success of a
military option. Certain members of the ExCom were confident that a hard military response, in
particular air strikes, would succeed, possibly without even any Soviet retaliation. General Curtis
LeMay, the Air Force Chief of Staff, was a proponent of this view. But it was shared by some
political leaders too. For example, the Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon was ‘certain that
the weapons could be eliminated,’ his greater concern was the potential ‘difficulties with public

---

29 Gallhofer, I.N. and W.E. Saris (1996) Foreign Policy Decision-Making: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of
Political Argumentation Praeger, Westport, CT, p. 96.
30 Thorson, S.J. and D.A. Sylvan (1982) ‘Counterfactuals and the Cuban Missile Crisis’ International Studies
Quarterly 26: 539-571, p. 540.
177.
opinion." He was not alone in his optimism. A number of other members of the ExCom, including Maxwell Taylor (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), Dean Acheson (former Secretary of State), John McCone (the CIA Director) and Paul Nitze (Assistant Secretary of Defence), also ‘believed from the start of the crisis that military action against the Soviet bases in Cuba carried little risk of retaliation.’ In fact, they believed that ‘the United States held all the cards; the only question in their minds was how great was the fall that the Soviets were bound to take.’

Kennedy himself was, initially, disposed to military action as well. Some contemporaries (such as LeMay), as well as analysts since, have even suggested that with a tougher policy, Kennedy could have got rid of Castro and the missiles at the same time. Such confidence is remarkable in that the military themselves were not prepared to offer any guarantees of success. They estimated that only 90% of known targets could be destroyed in a single air strike, after which further strikes would be necessary to concentrate on any (known) remaining ones. This may seem a pretty good success rate, but missing a few nuclear missiles is a big issue. Taylor had made these expectations clear from the beginning. On 18 October, he told the ExCom ‘There’ll never be a guarantee of 100 percent.’ They didn’t know how many missiles had warheads at that point either, but they had to assume that some did.

The important point for my argument is that, although the option of a military attack on Cuba was initially popular, in the course of the ExCom deliberations support for such aggressive action declined over time. Though it periodically reappeared, in the end, hawkish confidence in a military solution seems to have been stamped out, or overruled. Of course, the ExCom contained both hawks and doves throughout. However, while some hawkish committee members had staunch views that remained inflexible, the process of decision-making did appear to cause various individuals to change their opinions. During the ExCom meeting of 19 October, for example, ‘a tentative consensus was already reached to advise the president to set up a blockade, although the military advisors were not yet convinced. In the course of further meetings on this day, however, proponents of the air strike also began to shift their support to the blockade

36 Ibid., p. 175.
38 Zelikow, P. and E.R. May (1996) The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 133. Kennedy doesn’t seem to have been very clear at first on how the air strikes would work at all. Taylor explained to him in the ExCom meeting of 16 October how target lists would be updated and given to the pilots to track down and hit them, to which Kennedy asked ‘they know how to do that, do they?’ See Zelikow, P. and E.R. May (1996) The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 96.
39 And perhaps ‘owls,’ who preferred to take an intermediate strategy and garner information from the adversary’s next move, while keeping both hawkish and dovish options in reserve. See Allison, G., A. Carnesale and J.S. Nye (Eds.) (1986) Hawks, Doves and Owls: An Agenda for Avoiding Nuclear War, W.W. Norton, New York.
option. It seems that focused reasoning – in the shadow of holocaust – was gradually dispelling any initial optimism that military action would be possible without invoking an intolerable escalation towards war. The many hours of debate and analysis by this remarkable collection of men tended to lead to a pacification of initial responses. Had they had less time, such a process may not have occurred, with the consequence that the initial and widespread optimism about air strikes may have been more prominent. As Stuart Thorson and Donald Sylvan have argued, ‘a shorter perceived crisis time might well have led to the selection by the United States of more severe military options.’ It should be noted that, on Monday 29 October, or at the latest by Tuesday, the U.S. would have launched air strikes anyway – the diplomatic route already had an expiry date. Thus, it was to a large extent Khrushchev’s realization that the gamble had gone too far, rather than the U.S.’s, which averted war.

CONCLUSIONS

The Cuban Missile Crisis is not an easy event to untangle and, although I argued that information was sufficient on both sides to evaluate and make the key decisions, there are three factors that may have compromised decision-making. First, mistakes and new events throughout the crisis altered and confused the situation continuously. Second, Graham Allison’s book *Essence of Decision*, first published in 1971, has long argued that a satisfactory explanation of the Cuban Missile Crisis fails without a consideration of organisational behaviour and governmental politics that strongly influenced decisions on both sides. Third, on the U.S. side, decisions may have been biased towards the offensive because of Kennedy’s conviction that the Cuba crisis was yet another situation where appeasement would be intolerable. According to Lebow, Kennedy ‘gave every indication of viewing the Soviet Union though the prism of the 1930s. It is probably not an exaggeration to describe his world view as largely shaped by the fiasco of appeasement.’

Even accounting for these factors, however, there is good evidence that on the Soviet side Khrushchev over-estimated the chances that his missile deployment would be successful (and also be undetected until completion). It was this misplaced conviction that led to the crisis. On the other side, the U.S. was partly responsible too, in failing to predict that such a move was possible (because they wrongly thought their existing deterrent threat was working). Nevertheless, once the crisis broke, decision-makers in the U.S. that were optimistic about the ease of a rapid military strike were eventually convinced otherwise, or if not they were overruled.

---


Kennedy was much influenced by the results of appeasement at Munich, for which his father Joseph P. Kennedy, as British Ambassador at the time, had been a strong supporter. Other analogies were at play during the crisis too – a moral one not to carry out a surprise Pearl Harbor-like attack, and the fear of an unintended war as occurred in 1914 – both of these also advised caution.
The ExCom phenomenon may, therefore, have been responsible for extinguishing any U.S. over-optimism about a military solution. This is significant for the theory of this thesis: Positive illusions, especially the illusion of one’s control over events, are less pronounced with more intensive deliberation (see Chapter 3). Lebow specifically noted that both leaders progressively realised that they could not control events as well as they thought. In addition, much credit is due to Kennedy who, with pretty much the weight of the world on his shoulders, remained patient, resisted military bellicosity, constantly challenged assumptions, and consulted widely. At the time of the crisis he had just read Barbara Tuchman’s book *The Guns of August*, which ‘captured the false optimism and the aggressive day-dreaming in Europe in the summer of 1914.’ A number of people have suggested that for Kennedy and other decision-makers at the time, ‘the book could have been a rein on any tendency to indulge in wishful thinking.’

Khrushchev, once the crisis was in full swing, appears to have gambled a second time – holding out on a settlement to maximise potential concessions. This may have paid off in winning a non-invasion pledge for Cuba, and a secret agreement for U.S. Jupiter missiles to be removed from Turkey. But to achieve their own ends, both Kennedy and Khrushchev prolonged the crisis, and therefore also the period in which any number of minor events could have toppled the delicate situation into war, as several nearly did. Thus, some degree of positive illusions may have caused the crisis, but were not strong enough, or did not persist long enough, to push the decision-makers all the way to war.

**U.S. Restraint: Did an Absence of Positive Illusions Contribute?**

I argued above that the ExCom environment tended to pacify bellicose posturing. But it is worth noting that initial positive illusions may have left a mark on policy nevertheless. The initial reactions to the Soviet missile discovery, before there had been much feedback or reflection, were quite emotional (both Kennedys, for example, were incensed by the Soviet deception and eager to strike back). Those bellicose tendencies exerted a crucial influence in ruling out – at the early stages – any attempt at the opposite extreme: Pursuing purely diplomatic channels to remove the missiles. That was never discussed (Kennedy tasked the ExCom with how to remove the missiles, not how to resolve the crisis). Hawkish views continued to influence policy later on as well. While the ExCom may have had an overall softening effect via thorough debates

---


47 For example, at 10-11am on 27 October, an Alaskan based U-2 strayed into Soviet airspace and Soviet fighters were scrambled. U.S. fighters were also scrambled to escort the U-2 home. As a standard operating procedure under the conditions of the by-then high level of security alert, these U.S. fighters were armed with nuclear tipped air-to-air missiles. Later that day at around noon, another U-2 was shot down over Cuba, without the knowledge or sanction of Khrushchev, and the U.S. leadership had to intervene to avert the otherwise automatic retaliatory strike by the U.S. Air Force. See Allison, G. and P. Zelikow (1999) *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* Longman, New York.

about consequences of military action, at the same time its resident hawks shifted the range of possible responses towards the more aggressive end of the spectrum. This led to the selection of a middle-of-the-road decision, a quarantine with a threat of force in reserve, to ensure an acceptable compromise amidst the diversity of opinion within the ExCom.\(^49\)

After the crisis, Robert Kennedy drew specific lessons from the experience that amount to methods for stamping out positive illusions (or indeed any premature bias): ‘maximise time for decisions and adversary responses; inhibit initial response tendencies; preserve diversity of opinion in one’s own decision process; use expertise on the adversary; ensure civilian control of the military; give the adversary a face-saving way to comply with your requirements; and safeguard against inadvertent escalation.’\(^50\) Ted Sorenson also suggested that the principal lessons included watertight decision-making to ensure coherent signals to the enemy, and the employment of information rich and detailed evaluation of available options.\(^51\) These all sound rather obvious after the event, but nevertheless they delimit precisely the criteria that, when absent, may leave positive illusions unchecked and war more likely as a result.

I would argue that, while the hawks may have presented rational arguments for air strikes, they were being highly optimistic about both the chances of success, and of meeting a silent response. The military could not (and did not) guarantee great chances of hitting all the missiles, yet there was much talk of ‘surgical’ air strikes, and ‘removing’ the missiles.\(^52\) In the days before guided weapons, this was asking much of the air force, especially considering the fact that the U.S. could not know whether all missiles sites had been located, and how many missiles were already operational. Moreover, most of the decision-makers appreciated the likely requirement of a follow up invasion by ground forces, a massive undertaking that General Maxwell Taylor had warned at the outset would require 250,000 men. The chances that the Soviets would fail to respond must be somewhere close to zero.

If these were positive illusions, they were eliminated or prevented from influencing decision-making. It seems that the remarkable phenomenon of the ExCom was largely responsible for defusing over-confidence in a military solution. Kennedy himself seemed to have had a particularly high-awareness of the danger. He constantly demanded that other options be sought before they would resort to air strikes. This conclusion is supported by Irving Janis’s

---

\(^{49}\) An alternative viewpoint was propounded by the ‘traditionalists,’ who ‘insist that quiet diplomacy was ruled out by the need to act before the missiles became operational, which would make military action against them immeasurably more costly.’ However, that argument no longer stands up to scrutiny: ‘The pressure on the president to act had little to do with the status of the missiles. The CIA reported that some of the missile sites in Cuba were already operational at the time of their discovery but that most would not become operational until well into December. The pressure on the president to resolve the crisis was internal and generated by his political need to maintain a consensus within the Ex Comm.’ Lebow, R.N. (1990) ‘Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis’ Diplomatic History 14: 471-492, p. 484-485.

\(^{50}\) Bobrow, D.B. (1989) ‘Stories Remembered and Forgotten’ Journal of Conflict Resolution 33: 187-209 Although it may be possible to reduce positive illusions in initial deliberations, they may naturally resurface during war on account of their psychological function to increase and aid performance in times of stress and threat.


\(^{52}\) Zelikow, P. and E.R. May (1996) The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis Harvard University Press, Cambridge Such terms are scattered throughout the debate, especially at the beginning.
study of group decision-making biases that sometimes lead to policy failure.\textsuperscript{53} He concluded that, although various ‘groupthink’ biases were responsible for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, they were \textit{absent} in the case of U.S. decision-making in the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the end, Kennedy’s clarity of appreciation of the situation seems to have avoided many potential mistakes, and to have been relatively sensitive to both U.S. and Soviet perceptions. Although the Kennedy administration carefully tailored an image of success,\textsuperscript{54} his brother Robert Kennedy noted that:

‘After it was finished, he (Kennedy) made no statement attempting to take credit for himself or for the Administration for what had occurred. He instructed all members of the Ex Comm and government that no interview should be given, no statement made, which would claim any kind of victory. He respected Khrushchev for properly determining what was in his own country’s interest and what was in the interest of mankind.’\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{Soviet Restraint: Did an Absence of Positive Illusions Contribute?}

While I argued that Khrushchev’s positive illusions that the U.S. would tolerate missiles in Cuba sparked the crisis, later on it was clear that any such illusions had disappeared on the Soviet side too (perhaps, ironically, more thanks to Khrushchev than to his initially more cautious colleagues in the Soviet Presidium). By the end, it seems that Khrushchev had become very anxious and wanted an escape route. Some suggest that Khrushchev deliberately proposed the final Turkish missile deal in order to offer the U.S. a face-saving mechanism by which they could both exit the crisis.\textsuperscript{56} Khrushchev may have deliberately suggested this as a token deal that he knew the Americans could, in principle, make and would therefore offer an easy way out of the confrontation. One U.S. commentator noted that ‘it was the behaviour of a man begging our help to get off the hook.’\textsuperscript{57} It is possible that the idea for a deal involving the Turkish missiles came from elsewhere.\textsuperscript{58} But regardless of the origin of this proposal, it is clear that Khrushchev by this

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{56} The U.S. cannot have considered it entirely face-saving, given that they only complied on the condition that it would remain secret.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{57} Poundstone, W. (1992) \textit{Prisoner's Dilemma: John Von Neumann, Game Theory and the Puzzle of the Bomb} Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 209. Khrushchev may not have appreciated that the U.S. was planning to scrap these missiles anyway, but the idea that they might represent a tolerable U.S. concession was not new.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{58} For example, Soviet Defence Minister Rodion Y. Malinovsky had raised the Turkish missiles, as an analogy at least, on 23 October with a western Diplomat in Romania, and the Soviet Army newspaper the ‘Red Star’ suggested a Turkish-Cuban missile swap on 26 October. Another possible source was the 90 year old philosopher Bertrand Russell in the UK, who sent various telegrams during the crisis from his home in north Wales to Kennedy, Khrushchev and U Thant. Khrushchev actually replied to one of them in public on 24 October, via the Soviet news agency Tass, in which he highlighted the urgency of avoiding war and proposed an emergency meeting of the two leaders. Russell then wrote a second telegram to Khrushchev, this time explicitly suggesting final terms which could include missiles in Turkey (and/or Iran, Germany and the UK). Russell could, therefore, have seeded the concept of a missile swap, a possibility that gains circumstantial credit from the fact that Khrushchev’s final decision followed
point was extremely concerned about the very real possibility of nuclear war, which could happen either as a result of continuing escalation or of another incident. His last letter to Kennedy suggests a desperation to put all other aims aside and end the crisis at all costs. And this was not just what he was telling Kennedy. On 28 October, Khrushchev addressed the Presidium, telling them that they were facing the possibility of nuclear holocaust, and ‘in order to save the world, we must retreat.’

In the final stages of the crisis, Khrushchev had no positive illusions about victory.

Final Remarks

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, it seems that Americans’ perceived themselves to be in a game of ‘Chicken,’ while the Soviets’ perceived themselves in a game of ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma.’ These differing social dilemma games would predict that the U.S. needed to hold out as long as possible without conceding, while the Soviets needed to search for a way to ensure American compliance, and if not, to defect regardless. Such contrasting perceptions would mean that each side was vying for different goals, and would therefore have different criteria for evaluating what was possible to achieve. However, Schmidt argues that the direct contact between Kennedy and Khrushchev once the crisis had erupted permitted a reassessment of the situation. This meant that, in effect, they reformulated what sort of game they were in, which ultimately led to new preferences and to the possibility of a mutually advantageous settlement (possibly the best model for this new game was a ‘coordination game,’ in which agreement could be reached provided there was mutual trust).

But, while Kennedy and Khrushchev may have revised their positions, the perception of the initial games pervaded in the thinking of other observers, who later passed judgement from within those invalidated frameworks. Certainly, those who emphasised the ‘blinking first’ idea were apparently stuck with the chicken model. This reflected Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s triumphant comment that ‘we’re eyeball to eyeball and I think the other fellow just blinked.’ On the basis of such a simplistic model, the U.S. can be argued to have ‘won’ simply because they were not the one to back down. But even this perspective does not necessarily reflect resounding moral virtue or good judgement, since it implies that the U.S. was more prepared for a potentially nuclear war than the Soviet Union.

While many scholars applaud the U.S. decision-making of October 1962 as a model for how to resolve a crisis, the fact that the crisis arose in the first place is evidence of a major U.S. foreign policy and intelligence failure. Before the crisis, Kennedy’s administration had firmly

Russell’s third and final telegram by hours. UN Secretary General U Thant’s memoirs also suggest that Russell had influenced Khrushchev. See Ibid., Chapter 10: ‘Chicken and the Cuban Missile Crisis.’

believed the Soviets would not put nuclear missiles on Cuba. On 16 October, Kennedy lamented to the ExCom that ‘maybe our mistake was not saying, sometime before this summer, that if they do this we’re going to act.’ The U.S. administration had wrongly assumed that this was already explicit. ‘American leaders were taken by surprise in October 1962 because they thought it was clear to the Soviet Union that placing missiles in Cuba would not be tolerated.’ But even if the U.S. were guilty of over-estimating their deterrent threat (in which case a critic could use this to argue that it was rational of Khrushchev to attempt to put missiles on Cuba after all), it is still very difficult to defend the idea that the U.S. would ever have accepted missiles in Cuba once (even) a daring Soviet leader had decided to install them there against all expectations. No U.S. president could weather the resulting political storm of such appeasement. Given this, the U.S. may have misjudged their deterrent, but Khrushchev nevertheless misjudged the fact that they were willing to have their bluff called (i.e. that they really would act). Khrushchev can therefore be argued to have demonstrated positive illusions about the feasibility of installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. This is true whether or not his gamble represented a U.S. deterrence failure.

The Cuban Missile Crisis can be interpreted as a manifestation of what has been called the ‘potentially fatal paradox behind American strategic policy: that the country might have to go to war to affirm the very credibility that is supposed to make war unnecessary.’ Deterrence failed in 1962 in the face of daring behaviour elicited by positive illusions. As Bobrow put it: ‘The crisis shows the inadequacy of enabling crisis avoidance and deterrence maxims. In other words, it shows that an opponent’s leadership may take enormous risks without believing in the likelihood of commensurate gains, or on the basis of wishful thinking about those gains.’ Deterrence will fail if an opponent acts on positive illusions counter to the available evidence. Saddam Hussein’s extraordinary willingness to defy the U.S. and UN, and spark the war that would destroy him, may be another example.

The final result of the Cuban Missile Crisis, of course, was a chilling realisation that holocaust really was imminent – the shooting down of the U-2 without Soviet authority; the straying of another U-2 into Soviet airspace; the plethora of military escalations that were

---


automatically enacted as a result of the elevated alert status. Both Khrushchev and Kennedy lost any positive illusions they may initially have had once they were staring into the abyss of mutually assured destruction. As Kennedy said: ‘unconditional war can no longer lead to unconditional victory. Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind.’

Chapter VII – Vietnam

Seeing Red

We have the power to knock any society out of the 20th century.

Robert McNamara, U.S. Secretary of Defence

American intervention was not a progress sucked step by step into an unsuspected quagmire. At no time were policy-makers unaware of the hazards, obstacles and negative developments. American intelligence was adequate, informed observation flowed steadily from the field to the capital, special investigative missions were repeatedly sent out, independent reportage to balance professional optimism – when that prevailed – was never lacking. The folly consisted not in pursuit of a goal in ignorance of the obstacles but in persistence in the pursuit despite accumulating evidence that the goal was unattainable.

Barbara Tuchman

The Vietnam War provides a tough case for testing the positive illusions theory because faulty assessments should have been minimal, or stamped out completely, for the following reasons (summarised in Table 7.1). First, investment in the war was so prolonged, stretching over five presidencies, that over-confidence, if it existed at all, should not have persisted. Each administration had ample opportunity for reassessment of progress (precluding the hypothesis that decisions were simply knee-jerk reactions). Second, although it is often argued that withdrawal was never a realistic option for any president, recent research suggests that the U.S. was presented with some alternative options that offered ‘face-saving’ exit routes. Though none

---

2 Ibid., p. 234.
of these alternatives may have been easy or desirable, they were viable (precluding the hypothesis that decisions simply represented the only course of action). Third, intelligence information was voluminous and intensive. This, and the documentary record in the leaked ‘Pentagon Papers’ rules out the possibility that the prosecution of the Vietnam War represented decisions based on a lack of adequate information (precluding the hypothesis that decisions were good, given poor information).

The Vietnam War is also a challenging test case because it has been the subject of innumerable studies and already has well-established explanations. The Cold War power struggle, the effort to maintain a key bastion against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the pressures of domestic politics to meet this threat and electoral concerns all contribute to explaining the onset and perseverance of the war. Last but not least, there was a potent aversion to being the first president in American history to lose a war.

Despite the above, there is significant evidence that persistent negative feedback did not puncture an underlying expectation among key decision-makers that U.S. might would ultimately prevail. Policy did not change in line with accumulating evidence against it. Key figures, including presidents, cabinet members and military figures, under-estimated the opponent, and over-estimated the probability of achieving their goals.

**Table 7.1.** Elimination of basic alternative explanations for the Vietnam War and overview of conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elimination of basic alternatives</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>North Vietnam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment opportunity</td>
<td>Very long</td>
<td>Very long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative options</td>
<td>Yes (though constrained)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information availability</td>
<td>Reasonable (some flaws)</td>
<td>Reasonable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive illusions?</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>No*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main factor</td>
<td>Belief in eventual success</td>
<td>Inexhaustible resolve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* There was some evidence that they may have been over-optimistic about the Tet Offensive, but not overall.
BACKGROUND

From the aftermath of WW II until 1972, five presidents steadily committed the U.S. to war in Vietnam. The ‘quagmire myth,’ suggesting that the U.S. stumbled into Vietnam in small steps without realizing the potential dangers was rejected by the leaked ‘Pentagon Papers’ – a collection of government documents confirming a clear appreciation of the risks. The intelligence effort was enormous (if anything, there was too much information to handle). There should have been no illusions. Even the Army was set against a land war in Asia. The experience of the Korean War had exposed them to the reality of fighting a determined native population, and to the considerable risk of provoking the Soviet Union and China (which had proven willing to intervene not only with logistics, but with troops). The U.S. military also feared having to once again fight a limited war, being expected to win with one hand tied behind their back for political reasons. The Joint Chiefs of Staff advised accordingly against U.S. involvement. Before and throughout the conflict, evidence against the utility or likelihood of effective U.S. involvement in Vietnam accumulated from a variety of sources: From across the intelligence community, from Congress, from the Presidents’ own administration, and from specially appointed envoys (not to mention non-governmental sources). Given this feedback, even accounting for the various political pressures constraining the perceived options, U.S. policy represented an astonishingly die-hard optimism.

This is a longer chapter than the others because the Vietnam War offers the opportunity to identify what common factor led five different presidents (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon) to believe that war was a worthwhile investment. It allows an examination of whether and why expectations varied while holding constant the general characteristics of the conflict over the period (thereby ruling out a number of potentially confounding factors). I focus mainly on Kennedy and Johnson, because they represented the key decisions, first, to intervene militarily and, finally, to commit U.S. combat troops. Because it is a long chapter, I have condensed the main information into an initial overview of alternative explanations for the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and a general conclusion. The separate analyses of each administration lie in between. Readers can therefore skip the in-depth analyses of each administration if they so wish.

My analyses suggest that, throughout the Vietnam conflict, there was abundant evidence that discouraged U.S. involvement, let alone escalation. Two recent books have argued that despite the obviously complex circumstances, it should have been clear to U.S. policy-makers that withdrawal offered a better option than escalation. The fact that many of the negative assessments were the result of research commissioned by the administrations themselves meant that, as Barbara Tuchman wrote, ‘with hindsight, it is impossible to avoid asking why the American government ignored the advice of the persons appointed to give it … throughout the

---

long folly of Vietnam, Americans kept foretelling the outcome and acting without reference to their own foresight. Tuchman possibly exaggerates this effect somewhat. But the fact that the U.S. did systematically escalate, despite considerable evidence advising against it, certainly implies that their hopes and expectations outweighed the perceived risks and costs.

The man who leaked the Pentagon Papers, Daniel Ellsberg, argued that the U.S. presidents had no particular intention of winning per se, and were simply buying time for political expediency, resulting in his so-called ‘stalemate machine.’ New evidence shows this view is false, but even in Ellsberg’s analysis, which holds that policy-makers were fairly realistic, he nevertheless noted the existence of unexplained ‘self-deception’ and ‘over-optimistic expectations’ in the early Johnson administration. Irving Janis later found that ‘unrealistic hopes’ remained an important factor in 1964 and 1965 as well – the time of the crucial decisions for massive military escalation. Contrasting this view, Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts argue that ‘virtually all views and recommendations were considered and virtually all important decisions were made without illusions about the odds of success (though noting that of all things this is, ‘with hindsight, the hardest to believe’). However, while Gelb and Betts reject the notion that widespread and blithe over-optimism was a fundamental cause of U.S. decision-makers continuing the war, they agree that ‘whether and when these leaders were optimistic or pessimistic about the war is the only route to answering some of the pivotal issues and puzzles of Vietnam.’

One compelling theory to understand the escalation of the Vietnam War is that key decision-makers held positive illusions about its costs, risks and the likelihood of eventual victory. But before evaluating that hypothesis, I present the principal alternative explanations. I do this now because these need to be borne in mind throughout the subsequent analyses of the individual U.S. administrations. I would agree that those alternatives explain much of the underlying causes of the war, but I will argue later that they do not satisfactorily solve the whole puzzle.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM

A Bastion Against Communism

The U.S. government was exceptionally sensitive to the ‘red menace’ of communism in the post-war period. There was a rising tide of communist movements around the world, and the U.S. role in counter-acting it was a key factor influencing foreign policy for both Republican and Democratic governments throughout the cold war. Although it sometimes seems obsessive from

---

9 Ibid., p. 299. My italics.
today’s standpoint, the political currency behind this fear in the United States of the time should not be underestimated. The Joint Chiefs wrote to President Kennedy in 1963 warning that ‘the military and political effort of Communist China in South Vietnam ... is, in fact, a planned phase in the communist timetable for world domination.’10 People like John F. Kennedy and John Foster Dulles (Eisenhower’s Secretary of State), were particularly wrapped up in halting communism and felt a great responsibility for doing so. The so-called ‘domino theory’ was widely accepted: If Vietnam fell to communism, the logic went, then so would the rest of Southeast Asia ineluctably fall with it. The ghost of Munich weighed heavily on any suggestions of appeasement, especially with Kennedy.11 In reality, the presumption that ‘a communist victory in Vietnam would have any implications beyond that country was uncertain, but U.S. leaders refused to risk that it would not.’12 Hence, the widely held perception of the domino theory was a significant influence on policy at that time – regardless of one’s view today of whether it was right or wrong.

Maintaining American Cold War Prestige

Apart from worrying about communism itself, the U.S. administration tended to see ‘all countries not allied with either the Soviet Union or the United States as battlegrounds in a global struggle between the two.’13 During the Berlin crisis of 1961 (and following the difficult Vienna conference with Khrushchev), Kennedy remarked that ‘now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place.’14 Thus, Vietnam can be seen not just as one move of many within the larger game of cold war chess, but as a key demonstration of U.S. resolve that could engender significant advantages in subsequent east-west confrontations. To withdraw, wrote Secretary of State Dean Rusk, would mean ‘a drastic loss of confidence in the will and capacity of the free world to oppose aggression.’15 As such, defeating the single pawn of Vietnamese communism could serve a disproportionately greater utility, tantamount to thwarting the communist legions around the globe, at least temporarily. U.S. credibility in spheres other than Southeast Asia therefore remained a prominent argument for pursuing a war in far-off Vietnam, even if it was costly to do so and victory would be difficult.

Sunk Costs

As the war progressed, there was a steadily increasing concern for the costs of failure, in both the domestic and international political arenas, rather than the costs of fighting. Indeed, in some sense the reverse danger had presented itself: the prestige of the United States was now at stake because of its very involvement in the war (rather than the pressure to make a stand in the first place). Some facts corroborate this view, given that the war aims changed over time from halting communism to that of saving face. John McNoughton, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, suggested that U.S. aims were ‘70 percent to avoid a humiliating defeat to our reputation as guarantor.’ President Johnson was also concerned that withdrawal without concessions would ‘lose us face.’ No one wanted the enormous U.S. investment in lives, dollars and political commitment to have been in vain. Hence, the perceived need to press on with the war to save face was an important factor influencing policy.

Domestic Political Pressure

Even if none of the factors described above were a prominent concern of the leaders themselves, they nevertheless exerted an influence upon policy because of the value attached to them by other domestic political actors. For all of the administrations, political pressures could never be ignored, especially within the divided system of government in Washington. Being seen as soft on communism was a politically punishable offence, with high penalties. Kennedy and Johnson in particular remembered ‘Republican charges that the Democrats had ‘lost’ China [to the communists in 1949, as well as the failure to win in Korea] as having harmed their party for a decade.’ Johnson thought those earlier setbacks would be ‘chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.’ His chief advisors ‘believed with him that they would take greater punishment from the right by withdrawing than from the left by pursuing the fight’ (Johnson may have been proved right. As the U.S. recovered from Vietnam and witnessed communist threats in Laos, Cambodia, Angola and Afghanistan, a right-wing backlash did eventually emerge in the election and cold war policies of Reagan). No leader could afford to withdraw from a confrontation with communist aggression without seriously jeopardising their subsequent election, and ‘analysts who disagree ... massively discount the nature of politics in the

20 Tuchman, B. (1984) The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 318 – 319. The official view was still that victory would assuredly come: ‘We will persist in the defence of freedom and our continuing actions will be those which are justified and those that are made necessary by the continuing aggression of others. These actions will be measured and fitting and adequate. Our stamina and the stamina of the American people is equal to the task.’ Public speech by President Johnson, 1965. U.S. Department of Defense, The Pentagon Papers, Vol. III, pp. 323.
United States. As a result, ‘the alternative of disengagement was always seen to be worse – loss of faith in the American shield abroad and accusations at home of weakness and infirmity against Communism.’ Domestic public opinion also tended to favour the war up until the later Johnson years. Until 1966, a majority of Americans approved of his handling of the war. The initial anti-war demonstrations were, initially, largely ignored and held to represent troublemakers rather than the opinion of the average American. Even by the time of Nixon, he was able to make the claim (rightly or wrongly) that a ‘silent majority’ supported him. Lastly, but by no means least, there was the crucial sentiment that none of the presidents wanted to be the first in American history to lose a war.

* * *

None of these explanations need represent an overbearing reason why choosing to fight in Vietnam was a favoured policy. U.S. decision-makers may have perceived horrendous constraints in all options, and simply aimed to eliminate the worst ones. If one of those worst options was the political consequences of withdrawing and the predicted collapse of South Vietnam that was expected to follow, then continuing the war – regardless of cost – may have been perceived as the only acceptable option.

In the following analyses, my aim is not to ‘explain’ the Vietnam War, which has already been attempted by plenty of other authors. My aim is to show that, regardless of one’s favoured theory for the underlying causes of the war, there are still gaps and puzzles as to why the war was pursued the way it was in the face of considerable negative information. Positive illusions may help to explain this.

THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION (1952 – 1960)

The Eisenhower Administration: Information and Reaction

Eisenhower already inherited a heavy commitment to supporting France’s war in Indochina from Truman. Truman had initially supplied aircraft and $119 million to help. By 1952, this had steadily increased to $300 million. Eisenhower had the opportunity to reconsider this policy, but he continued the trend until, in 1953, U.S. assistance reached $1 billion – one half of the cost of the war. Eisenhower was under no false pretences about the likely opposition or the dangers of

23 Gallup Polls.
involvement in Vietnam. He was well aware, perhaps better than most given his career, that any military action could be expected to lead to escalation.

Despite the U.S. governments’ strong desire to prevent the impending spread of communism, in 1953 the Plans Division of the Army General Staff suggested a ‘reevaluation of the importance of Indochina and Southeast Asia in relation to the possible cost of saving it.’ Vice-Admiral A.C. Davis, the advisor on foreign military affairs to the Secretary of Defence, said ‘involvement of US forces in the Indochina war should be avoided at all practical costs.’ A CIA report stated that ‘even if the United States defeated the Viet-Minh field forces, guerrilla action could be continued indefinitely ... and [the U.S.] might have to maintain a military commitment in Indochina for years to come.’

The Army Chief of Staff, General Matthew B. Ridgway, was opposed to sending ground forces. Having been commander of U.S. forces in the latter part of the Korean War, he knew all too well the complications of fighting a war in Asia, and his advice was not to do it again. Ridgway sent a ‘large team of specialists, representing every branch of the Army, on an extended visit to Indochina. The result was a comprehensive report stating that success in Indochina would require well over three hundred thousand U.S. troops, high rates of casualties for five to seven years, and an expansionist fiscal policy that would reverse the constraints Eisenhower had placed on the budget and in particular on the military.’

The French mountain stronghold of Dien Bien Phu was defeated by Vietnamese forces on the 7 May 1954, marking the defeat and final withdrawal of the old colonial power. The French experience of 150,000 casualties in a country they already knew well was not alarming enough to deter American optimism for winning a war in Vietnam. By 1954 evidence that involvement would be a mistake was widespread. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were opposed even to sending the small Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces, and they issued a memorandum in August 1954 recommending that the United States ‘should not participate.’ Further emissaries were sent to Saigon on information gathering missions. Again they returned with the same message: do not get involved.

Senator Mike Mansfield, on his second trip, reported that the situation had if anything worsened, largely because of a ‘consistent underestimating’ of the political and military strength of the Viet-Minh. He pressed the point that ‘unless there is a reasonable expectation of fulfilling our objectives, the continued expenditure of the resources of the citizens of the United States is unwarranted and inexcusable.’ General J. Lawton Collins was sent separately to Paris to consult with the French and evaluate the leadership potential of Ngo Dinh Diem, America’s preferred candidate to head the South Vietnamese government. Collins found Diem so unconvincing in his ability either to unite South Vietnam or compete effectively with Ho Chi Minh that he

---

28 U.S. Department of Defense, The Pentagon Papers, Vol. I, p. 215. They added, however, that if ‘political considerations are overriding’ they would ‘agree to the assignment.’
recommended a ‘re-evaluation of our plans for assisting Southeast Asia.’\textsuperscript{30} Although Collins saw withdrawal as an undesirable option, he thought it ‘may be the only sound solution.’

The Eisenhower Administration: Positive Illusions?

Eisenhower’s decision-making is considered to have been of high quality in comparison to other presidents during the war (although he never had to make the hardest choices), and this may have prevented any hasty jump into a direct military commitment.\textsuperscript{31} Nevertheless, despite the cautionary analyses outlined above, Eisenhower’s administration gradually committed the United States to increasing financial and military assistance, first to the French, then to the South Vietnamese. He took risks in providing strong support to Diem, and by sending hundreds of American military personnel into Vietnam. Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, had the task of garnering domestic and international support to hold back the rising tide of communism in Vietnam. Yet, by the time of the Geneva conference on Indochina’s future in May 1953, he had failed to prevent a communist regime becoming established in the North, could not convince Britain or other Allies to join them, failed to keep France in the field, failed to gain approval from Eisenhower for direct involvement and even failed to get France’s agreement to join the European Defence Community (which had been expected as a reciprocal move for the massive American aid for France’s war in Indochina). Despite the widespread evidence suggesting that the American policy of containment was a failure, Dulles ‘was not prepared to infer from them any reason to re-examine policy.’\textsuperscript{32}

Given the considerable pessimistic views on U.S. involvement, why did the U.S. not only fail to withdraw, but actually escalate? By April 1955 an attempted coup gave reason to believe that the South Vietnamese government under Diem did not meet the standards of performance that Eisenhower himself had specifically made as a condition to American aid. It thus offered a perfect chance to exit. However the U.S. did the reverse and committed itself further. The continued fear of the consequences of communist expansion appeared to be the overbearing factor. Eisenhower even went so far as to support Diem in the highly controversial decision to rule out the planned South Vietnam elections (stipulated by the UN in the Geneva Accords of 1954), because of a concern that current conditions in the country were likely to lead to a ‘biased’ vote (Ho Chi Minh was expected to win). An independent report by American political scientists suggested that ‘American aid has built a castle on sand.’\textsuperscript{33} Yet, U.S. financial support soared ever upward. American military personnel had been on the ground since Truman’s time (even though the French did not want them and resented their presence), but Eisenhower increased it from a handful to several hundred. At this stage, the war in Indochina was not a big public issue, but the continued escalation despite considerable counter evidence implies that U.S. policy-makers

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 280. The study was conducted by Michigan State University between 1955 – 1962, and directed by Professor Wesley Fishel.
remained optimistic they would ultimately prevail. The communist National Liberation Front set up in 1960 and South Vietnam entered into a civil war proper, just in time for Eisenhower to pass on the mess to his successor.

THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION (1961 – 1963)

The Kennedy Administration: Information and Reaction

The new Administration took possession of a legacy in Vietnam that they appeared willing to continue without much change. ‘As far as the record shows,’ wrote Barbara Tuchman, ‘they held no session devoted to re-examination of the engagement they had inherited in Vietnam, nor did they ask themselves to what extent the United States was committed or what was the degree of national interest involved. Nor, so far as it appears in the mountains of memoranda, discussions and options flowing over the desks, was any long-range look taken at long-range strategy.’

Even so, Kennedy cannot be accused of ignoring intelligence. Rather, ‘he dispatched ... an endless series of upper-level official missions to assess conditions in Vietnam. Secretary [of Defence] McNamara was later to go no fewer than five times in 24 months, and missions at the secondary level went back and forth to Saigon like bees flying in and out of a hive.’

Information was also already flowing back via the MAAG, the U.S. Embassy, and the intelligence agencies.

Not all information about progress in Vietnam was negative. For example, after visiting Vietnam in May 1961, Vice President Johnson recommended on the broader issue of involvement throughout Southeast Asia, that ‘we move forward promptly with a major effort to help these countries defend themselves.’

William Gibbons suggested that in 1961 Kennedy was actually ‘reluctant to move as fast or as far as some of his advisors recommended.’ Moreover, the two senators who were later to speak vociferously against involvement, William Fulbright and Mike Mansfield, both argued in Congress at this time that the President and U.S. foreign policy should have more independent power and trusting support from Congress, and this view ‘reflected the general attitude among most members of Congress at that point.’

A new mission was sent in October 1961 following an increase in Viet Cong infiltration across the Laos border. It was led by General Maxwell Taylor, military representative of the president (and soon to become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and Walt Rostow, an ardent hawk of whom Tuchman claims it was a ‘foregone conclusion’ that he ‘would find reasons for going forward in Vietnam.’ Various officials from the State and Defence Department, the Joint Chiefs offices, and the CIA accompanied them. The report they produced suggested that:

---

34 Ibid., p. 283.
37 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 58.
38 Ibid., Vol. II, see p. 127.
Vietnam – Seeing Red

‘the program to “save South Vietnam” would be made to work only by the infusion of American armed forces to convince both sides of [U.S.] seriousness ... It quite accurately foresaw the consequences: American prestige, already engaged would become more so; if the ultimate object was to eliminate insurgency in the South, “There is no limit to our possible commitment (unless we attack the source in Hanoi).” Here, in both statement and in parenthesis, the future military problem was formulated.’

Since the evidence was to some extent mixed, one could still perceive at this point that real American involvement on the ground would swing events against the communist upsurge. But even if this was the case, it was still clearly a huge risk to take (i.e. even if the information was perceived as simply ambiguous, not negative). An analysis on the Taylor-Rostow report by William P. Bundy (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence) suggested that ‘an early and hard-hitting operation has a good chance (70% would be my guess) of arresting things and giving Diem a chance to do better and clean up ... The 30% chance is that we would wind up like the French in 1954; white men can’t win this kind of fight.’ Given, in the best case, ambiguity, if not an overall caution from this and the various other intelligence sources, Kennedy’s move to extend U.S. involvement reflects a bold and optimistic move into a foggy unknown. Kennedy increased the number of U.S. personnel by ten times, ‘a step in some ways comparable to Johnson’s escalation in the summer of 1965.’ He also continued to strongly support Diem’s unpopular regime. Meanwhile, negative information continued to increase.

A further report, delivered in December 1962, warned that ‘the war would last longer, cost more in money and lives than anticipated, and that “the negative side of the ledger is still awesome”.’ Kennedy was clearly receptive to reports such as this that he himself commissioned, indeed ‘he was aware of the negatives and bothered by them, but he made no adjustment, nor did any of his chief advisors suggest making one.’

In fact, ‘every member of Kennedy’s inner circle supported’ the military commitment to Vietnam. Originally, Dean Rusk had been hesitant. Though firmly behind preventing the spread of communism, he thought it was a bad idea to make a major commitment of American prestige


42 Tuchman, B. (1984) The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 302. See also Gibbons, W.C. (1986) The United States Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships Princeton University Press, Princeton, Vol. II: 1961 – 1964, p. 134. The mission was led by Roger Hilsman (head of State Department Intelligence) and Michael Forrestal (on National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy’s staff). Tuchman notes that because these two were ‘office holders without [Senator] Mansfield’s independent base, they did not dispute the prevailing policy ... Buried in Hilsman’s intensively detailed report were many specific negatives, but no moves were made to adjust to the information the investigators brought back.’ The report was generally supportive of U.S. involvement, but explicit in outlining the possible negative consequences of pursuing any military commitment.


to what he called a ‘losing horse.’ He eventually consented his agreement, but wrote to the President that ‘in doing so, we recognize that the introduction of United States and other SEATO forces may be necessary to achieve this objective.’ In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he said in camera ‘Can you or should you invest in a regime when you know in your heart that that regime is not viable?’ Yet, caution came from outside Kennedy’s inner circle too. John Kenneth Galbraith, U.S. Ambassador to India, warned Kennedy that his administration’s good promise could be ‘sunk under the rice fields.’

History should also have suggested significant dangers. Like the Eisenhower administration before him, once in office Kennedy was not apparently concerned with Vietnam’s excellent history of repelling invaders.

‘The American failure to find any significance in the defeat of the French professional army, including the Foreign Legion by [what were seen as] small, thin-boned, out-of-uniform Asian guerrillas is one of the great puzzles of the time. How could Dien Bien Phu be so ignored? When David Shoenbrun, correspondent for CBS, who had covered the French war in Vietnam, tried to persuade the President of the realities of that war and of the loss of French officers equivalent each year to a class at St. Cyr [the French Military Academy], Kennedy answered, “Well, Mr. Schoenbrun, that was the French. They were fighting for a colony, for an ignoble cause. We’re fighting for freedom, to free them from the Communists, from China, for their independence”.’

This is remarkable because Kennedy had himself said of Vietnam earlier that ‘if it were ever converted into a white man’s war, we should lose it as the French had lost a decade earlier.’

Information from the field should have become alarming. The failure of the ARVN forces need not have been taken on as a responsibility of the U.S. military. ‘When the South Vietnamese failed to come up and meet the mark at the advisory level, then we never should have committed US forces. We should have failed at the advisory effort and withdrawn.’ By 1962, the media were also ‘probing the chinks and finding the short-falls and falsehoods in the compulsive optimism of official briefings.’ A mission by three Senators in late 1962 reported further that ‘a protracted struggle, at best, can be the only realistic forecast.’ Senator Mansfield, now the Majority Leader, was requested by Kennedy to visit Vietnam once again in December 1962. He returned to say that ‘seven years and $2 billion of United States aid later ... South Vietnam

---

50 Ibid., p. 287.
appears no more stable than it was at the outset.\textsuperscript{54} Kennedy confided later that ‘I got angry with Mike for disagreeing so completely, and I got angry with myself because I found myself agreeing with him.’\textsuperscript{55} If Kennedy himself found at least some of the negative indications convincing, why did he fail to modify policy?

The enhanced U.S. prestige and presidential approval arising from the favourable outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 offered an opportunity to re-evaluate Vietnam policy with a much lesser danger of domestic wrath. A specific exit option arose following the Buddhist revolt in Saigon in 1963 (in which Diem was killed). The revolt demonstrated that the U.S.-supported South Vietnamese government was failing badly. Although Kennedy’s assassination soon afterwards may have somewhat compromised any ‘exit options’ around this time for Johnson, the revolt did spark serious discussions in Washington in which Robert Kennedy asked ‘whether a Communist take-over could be successfully resisted with any government. If it could not, now was the time to get out of Vietnam entirely, rather than waiting.’\textsuperscript{56} Nevertheless, ‘despite reports to the contrary, policy makers in Saigon and Washington continued to believe that the situation in Vietnam was improving.’\textsuperscript{57}

The Kennedy Administration: Positive Illusions?

It is perhaps notable that the Kennedy administration was a generation of war winners. ‘Like the President, many of his associates were combat veterans of World War II ... Accustomed to success in the war and in their postwar careers, they expected no less in Washington.’\textsuperscript{58} This may have contributed towards an attitude that, even if war was undesirable, political problems could be solved by military means. ‘Military power and diplomacy were complementary instruments, not alternatives, in Kennedy’s approach to crises in Berlin and Cuba as well as in Vietnam and Laos.’\textsuperscript{59} Revisionists writing on the Cuban Missile Crisis argue that ‘Kennedy’s successful use of coercive diplomacy led ineluctably to American intervention in Vietnam.’\textsuperscript{60} That is, his apparent success in repelling communist advances in Cuba may well have reinforced an ever stronger belief that firm U.S. resolve could be successful elsewhere too. David Kaiser also considers the fact that the Kennedy administration represented the so-called ‘GI generation,’ argued to bear the characteristic of ‘relentless optimism,’ and an ‘unwillingness to question basic assumptions, or to even admit the possibility of failure ... the GI generation that led the nation into the war contained almost no doubters about the wisdom or the success of the enterprise.’\textsuperscript{61}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} O’Donnell, K., D.F. Powers and J. McCarthy (1973) \textit{Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye: Memories of John Fitzgerald Kennedy} Pocket Books, New York, p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Tuchman, B. (1984) \textit{The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam} Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 286.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Lebow, R.N. (1990) ‘Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis’ \textit{Diplomatic History} 14: 471-492, p. 488.
\end{itemize}
Even General Maxwell Taylor, who echoed Kennedy’s foresight that ‘only the Vietnamese can defeat the Viet-Cong,’ was nevertheless confident that the U.S. ‘can show them how the job might be done.’ According to Tuchman, ‘this was the elemental delusion that underwrote the whole endeavour’ – the U.S. assumed that it would be able to stimulate South Vietnam to win. Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defence, was particularly hawkish and ‘certain of an American victory.’ He once bragged in a Pentagon briefing that ‘we have the power to knock any society out of the 20th century.’ Coming from a successful commercial and academic background, the ‘training and mental habits had formed in McNamara a man of the implicit belief that, given the necessary material resources and equipment and the correct statistical analysis of relative factors, the job – any job – could be accomplished.’

The expectation of victory prevailed despite an acknowledgement that it may not be easy or cheap to attain. A 1961 Vietnam Task Force Report stated that ‘come what may, the U.S. intends to win this battle.’ Key factions in the U.S. military retained a high level of confidence in victory. General Taylor and General Harkins ‘persisted in transmitting overly optimistic military reports to the President.’ The Joint Chiefs of Staff had written off the French defeat as due to ‘French errors’ which ‘included major political delays and indecisions,’ so the U.S. military simply had to ‘make sure we don’t repeat their mistakes.’ They noted in parentheses that ‘the French also tried to build the Panama Canal’ – in other words, Americans would do it better.

Contrary to the official optimism, military advisors had not in reality had much effect, and ‘by 1962 the situation had become desperate.’ While official channels continued to give optimistic assessments, this did not reflect unanimous opinion. ‘At the ground level, colonels and non-coms and press reporters were more doubtful,’ and John Kenneth Galbraith, Ambassador to India who reported from Saigon in 1961 at Kennedy’s request ‘advised resisting any pressure for introducing American troops because “Our soldiers would not deal with the vital weakness.” He thought a change and a new start were essential, and thought no one could promise a safe transition,’ adding ominously that, ‘we are now married to failure.’ Galbraith wrote again to Kennedy in 1962, suggesting a political solution that would install a non-aligned government and effect an American withdrawal, otherwise ‘we shall replace the French as the colonial force in the area and bleed as the French did.’ But the Joint Chiefs of Staff rejected this proposal and

---

65 Ibid., p. 297.
71 Ibid., p. 301. Galbraith’s advice had not always been consistent, having argued at one point in 1961 that they should even consider replacing Diem with a military government, after which the war could be won relatively quickly and easily. See Gelb, L. and R.K. Betts (1980) The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked, Washington, D.C., p. 87.
‘advocated no change in American policy, but rather that it be “pursued vigorously to a successful conclusion.” This was the general consensus; Kennedy did not contest it; Galbraith’s suggestion died.’

The optimism of the military prevailed over the warnings coming from other channels. The key decision-makers carried on believing, in the face of considerable counter evidence, that victory would eventually come. The military optimism and can-do attitude need not have been particularly persuasive to Kennedy, who was intensely sceptical of military advice after the experience of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. He once declared that he ‘could not believe a word the military was telling him’ and ‘had to read the newspapers to find out what was going on’ in Vietnam. Yet, according to John Stoessinger, even Kennedy ‘became the victim of that particularly American form of hubris that blithely assumed that technology, computerlike efficiency, production air power, and, above all, competent American management could overcome any adversary.’

THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION (1963 – 1968)

The Johnson Administration: Information and Reaction

Despite certain international and domestic imperatives, Johnson need not have simply picked up where Kennedy left off. ‘It remained open to him to wash his hands of Vietnam.’ Fredrik Logevall concurs, on the basis of more recent information, that Johnson indeed had alternative options available to him, but chose war. Although the pulling back option was disliked because of all the original reasons and the prestige that Kennedy had already invested, it was now ever more clear that continued involvement ‘would involve heavy costs, for Johnson’s advisers told him almost from the beginning that success might require bombing North Vietnam and ordering substantial American forces into combat in South Vietnam. In effect, Johnson had to decide whether or not to go to war.’ In fact, the ‘considerations on one side or other were much like those of [Kennedy in] 1961.’ By the time Johnson was at the key decision-making stage, there were significant new doubts that not only raised the stakes, but also lowered the probability of achieving gains:

‘Recent events in Saigon argued for disengagement, for they made it seem more questionable than ever that South Vietnam deserved to be termed “free.” Also, they increased significantly

---

77 Ibid., p. 102.
the chances of failure. Further, the possibility that the American public might not support a war in Vietnam had become far more apparent. And in early 1965, when the President approached decisions for war, significant numbers of Congressmen and editorial writers voiced opposition.  

The fear of Southeast Asia falling prey to communism was still an overbearing concern and ‘compared with 1961, the reasoning remained practically unchanged.’ Yet, even at the start of Johnson’s first full term:

‘a good look would have revealed that the raison d’être for American intervention had slipped considerably. When the CIA was asked by the President for its estimate of the crucial question whether, if Laos and South Vietnam fell to Communist control, all Southeast Asia would necessarily follow, the answer was in the negative; that except for Cambodia, ‘It is likely that no other nation in the area would quickly succumb to Communism as a result of the fall of Laos and Vietnam’.

Thus, the whole logic of the original motive was put into question. Johnson asked for this information himself, and then neglected it. He failed to update his policy despite the fact that one of the fundamental reasons for the original U.S. intervention had been identified as invalid. At the same time, the inter-agency Working Group on Vietnam also warned that the U.S. could not ‘guarantee to maintain a non-Communist South Vietnam short of committing ourselves to whatever degree of military action would be required to defeat North Vietnam and probably Communist China militarily.’ Despite the Working Group’s warning, and those of George Ball, ‘the President, his Secretaries and the Joint Chiefs were sure that American power could force North Vietnam to quit while the United States carefully avoided a clash with China.’

Johnson ‘received a wide variety of advice both informally and formally,’ and there is ‘more than adequate evidence to deflate the argument that Johnson heard only the views of a closed “Tuesday lunch” group. Arguments about groupthink or bureaucratic or organizational roadblocks do not stand up to the archival evidence.’ Hence, other factors must explain the decisions to escalate. One possibility is that early decisions were constrained by a lack of adequate information on enemy strengths. But this does not appear to have been a problem either. The next few paragraphs argue that information was good enough to understand the risks involved.

By the time Johnson took office, the permanent Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was up and running in addition to CICV (Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam),

---

78 Ibid., p. 102.
79 Ibid., p. 103.
described by MACV chief of intelligence Major General Joseph McChristian as ‘one of the finest supports of combat intelligence that was ever developed in support of our forces in wartime.’

One intelligence unit, the Combined Document Exploitation Centre, ‘was dealing with half a million pages of captured NLF and NVA material every month. About 10 percent was of prime intelligence value.’ If anything, the difficulty was that there was too much intelligence. As Gelb and Betts put it, ‘never before have the platters of the political leadership been so filled with the minutiae of war.’ The U.S. administration also began to reassess the long-term chances of success:

‘The Administration at this stage [in 1965] began to study the chances of “winning.” Given a military task, the military had to believe they could accomplish it if they were to believe in themselves and quite naturally demanded more and more men for the purpose. Their statements were positive and the requisitions large. Facing escalation, McNamara asked General Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, what assurance the United States could have “of winning in South Vietnam if we do everything we can.” If “winning” meant suppressing all insurgency and eliminating Communists from South Vietnam, Wheeler said, it would take 750,000 to a million men and up to seven years.’

Michael Handel argued that a leader’s ‘readiness to discard intelligence that reveals flaws in his policies is particularly strong when his mistakes are otherwise unlikely to be detected in the short run.’ In Vietnam, ‘Johnson “could afford” to ignore intelligence reports on the lack of progress in the Vietnam war’ Handel argues, ‘hoping that the situation was not as bad as it seemed; and since he assumed that the U.S. could not lose in any event, any final decisions or unfortunate consequences could be passed on to the next administration.’ Such a theory is not satisfactory, however, because it does not explain those hopes and assumptions, nor the concomitant political imperatives to try and improve the situation, nor the massive escalations.

In 1964 U.S. naval units off the Vietnamese mainland were attacked by gunboats. Both U Thant and De Gaulle took this opportunity to offer Johnson new exit options, either as another Geneva convention or via superpower talks. Neither would bring assurances of a non-communist South Vietnam, and the proposals were ignored by the Johnson administration. Johnson and his advisors were of the opinion that talks would just signal low resolve and demoralise the ARVN
and the South. Under-secretary of State George Ball was sent to meet De Gaulle and told him that:

‘The United States “did not believe in negotiating until our position on the battlefield was so strong that our adversaries might make the requisite concessions.” De Gaulle rejected this position outright. The same illusions, he told Ball, had drawn France into such trouble; Vietnam was a “hopeless place to fight;” a “rotten country,” where the United States could not win for all its great resources. Not force but negotiation was the only way.’

Ball himself eventually became a strong advocate against ground combat and the bombing campaigns. Standing as the ‘one convinced and consistent opponent of further military action,’ he attempted to press the arguments against war. Nevertheless, the policy-makers elected to fight and negotiate at the same time, reining themselves in to keep to a limited war while hoping it was enough to force the North to stop fighting for the South. Johnson managed to get a congressional resolution to repel armed attack (the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, of 7 August). 1964 was an election year for a third of the Senate, and none of them wished to step out of line from supporting American servicemen overseas. The resolution passed and opened the way for deepening military involvement in Vietnam.

General Wallace Greene, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, and the Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, estimated that they would need between 500,000 and 750,000 troops and five to seven years would be needed to win. By 1965 even Maxwell Taylor, originally a proponent of the ground war, was drafting his own plan for ending U.S. involvement. He wrote that the ‘white-faced soldier armed, equipped and trained as he is [is] not [a] suitable guerrilla fighter for Asian forests and jungles. [The] French tried to adapt their forces to this mission and failed; I doubt that U.S. forces could do much better.’

In Washington, George Ball wrote a number of memoranda urging disengagement. Clark Clifford (who would eventually succeed McNamara as Johnson’s Secretary of Defense) ‘warned in a private letter [to Johnson] that on the basis of CIA assessments, further build-up of ground forces could become an “open-end commitment ... without realistic hope of ultimate victory”.’ Scepticism was certainly not limited to certain factions in the U.S. Although some other countries, such as Australia and the Republic of Korea, supported the war, many others increasingly expected that U.S. policy in Vietnam would fail. British diplomats from across Southeast Asia, for example, thought the U.S. could not win.

---

Johnson presided over a major inter-agency disagreement on estimates of enemy strengths, which obviously has implications for my analysis of whether U.S. expectations exceeded the available evidence. I will describe this briefly below, but the upshot is that the decision-makers knew about the dispute and this should have made them, if anything, more cautious, rather than acting as they actually did – deepening U.S. involvement.

In 1967 the CIA estimated the number of Viet Cong to be twice the number predicted by the U.S. military intelligence community (headed by MACV). At that time, the main CIA proponent of the elevated figures, Samuel Adams, campaigned unsuccessfully to get MACV to update their figures, and when that failed, he went direct to the White House. As Hughes-Wilson highlights, ‘this was not just some arcane matter of numbers. The answer really would have very real practical military consequences.’96 Both sides stuck steadfastly to their own estimates. After the war, a CBS television show accused General Westmoreland and figures in the U.S. military intelligence community of deliberately deceiving the press, the public and Washington into artificially suppressed enemy Order of Battle data, in order to ‘lead the people, Congress, the Joint Chiefs and the President to believe we were winning a war, which in fact we were losing.’97 The next day’s New York Times editorial claimed the program had revealed how Johnson had been ‘victimized by mendacious intelligence.’98 This was suggested to have ‘robbed this country of the ability to make critical judgements about its most vital security interests during a time of war.’99

A highly publicised trial ensued of Westmoreland vs. CBS, which was eventually settled before any ruling, but only after it had attracted 2 and a half years of investigative case preparation and five months of trial, which included the examination of 500,000 pages of formerly classified documents. No evidence was found of any such deliberate conspiracy, and this has been corroborated by subsequent analyses.100 Moreover, ‘the trial record made it clear that all those who conceivably had a need to know about the “numbers dispute” for policy-making purposes did know.’101 The hypothesis that Johnson was limited to erroneous information and that this absolved his bellicose policies can therefore be ruled out.102

98 Ibid., p. 142.
99 This comes from the CBS television program proposal. See Ibid., p. 138.
101 Cubbage, T.L. (1989) ‘Westmoreland Vs. C.B.S.: Was Intelligence Corrupted by Policy Demands?’ In Leaders and Intelligence, (Ed, Handel, M.I.) Frank Cass & Co., London, pp. 118 - 180, p. 147. What was the evidence that led to claims of a conspiracy? (Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references are to page numbers from Cubbage, T.L. (1989) ‘Westmoreland Vs. C.B.S.: Was Intelligence Corrupted by Policy Demands?’ In Leaders and Intelligence, (Ed, Handel, M.I.) Frank Cass & Co., London, pp. 118 - 180). There were indeed some indications of political pressure to cap enemy force estimates. Westmoreland is reported as saying when presented with the new figures that ‘if I send that cable to Washington, it will create a political bombshell’ (p. 124). Colonel Hawkins (in charge of the Order of Battle data) told Adams that ‘he had orders ... to stay below that number [the existing MACV
Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon sent a message to Walt Rostow at the White House warning of the ‘devastating impact if it [the new figures] should leak out (as these things often do) that despite all our success in grinding down the VC/NVA here ... [some statistics showed] ... that they are really much stronger than ever. Despite all the caveats, this is the inevitable conclusion which most of the press could reach.'

Though there may have been an intention to avoid the dispute reaching the press, there is no evidence that the object or the result was to deceive the decision-makers in the conflict, which is the only crucial aspect of this debate for my study. In any case, the higher CIA estimates would have had, if anything, a negative effect on U.S. involvement (not justifying greater optimism, but less). Yet we observed the opposite — continued escalation, so regardless of which side in the debate was actually right, my conclusions remain unchanged. The Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, had told his crusading colleague Sam Adams that ‘it would have made no difference to U.S. policy if he had told the White House that there were a million more Viet Cong.’ U.S. policy was already entrenched in an estimate of 300,000’ (p. 131).

Interagency rivalry was also a critical factor; when Adams showed an initial draft to a CIA superior, he was told that ‘maintenance of the Viet Cong order of battle count was the responsibility of J-2 MACV and the CIA had no business intruding’ (p. 127.)

Another motive was that indicated by Ambassador Robert Komer (Director of the Pacification Program in Vietnam) who ‘believed that releasing of increased figures concerning the enemy’s strength would cause ‘political’ problems for MACV because it would come at a time [June 1967] when Westmoreland was asking for more troops’ (p. 129). Hughes-Wilson points out that ‘the military had an interest in proving that they were winning and that General Westmoreland’s military policies were successful ... At risk was the intensely sensitive political calculation of U.S. troop-strength requirements in Vietnam, the barometer of MACV’s success’ (Hughes-Wilson, J. (1999) Military Intelligence Blunders Carroll & Graf, New York, p. 189, 191). Westmoreland’s deputy, General Creighton Abrams explained in a cable to the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, that the new figures would not be used. He wrote: ‘We have been projecting an image of success over the recent months, and properly so. Now, when we release the figures of 420-432,000, the newsmen will immediately seize on the point that the enemy force has increased about 120-130,000. All available caveats and explanations will not prevent the press from drawing an erroneous and gloomy conclusion as to the meaning of the increase. All those who have an incorrect view of the war will be reinforced and the task will become more difficult’ (p. 130).

Meanwhile, Dr. George Carver, the CIA’s Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs also cabled Helms saying that ‘General Westmoreland has given instruction tantamount to a direct order that VC strength total would not exceed 300,000 ceiling’ (p. 131). Sam Adams demanded an internal CIA inquiry, which turned out not to support his assessment although, as Cubbage suggests, ‘it is probable that the review staff had access to some of the Top Secret Limdis Back-Channel messages that made it obvious, at a war-policy level, why a wholesale cataloguing of combatant and non-combatant Viet Cong in the order of battle count was not then in the national interest, and at the same time revealed that all of the policy-makers who needed to be aware of the ‘numbers issue’ were aware’ (p. 134).

102 Walt Rostow’s CBS interview (which was not included in the documentary) specifically said that ‘he, and through him President Johnson, had been aware of the debate between MACV and the CIA concerning whether the numbers in the two categories [these disputed categories were ‘guerilla-militia’ and ‘political cadre’] had been underestimated by MACV. He said that neither he nor Johnson was aware of any MACV effort to put a ceiling on the enemy strength or to deceive the White House about the enemy.’ (Cubbage, T.L. (1989) ‘Westmoreland Vs. C.B.S.: Was Intelligence Corrupted by Policy Demands?’ In Leaders and Intelligence, (Ed, Handel, M.I.) Frank Cass & Co., London, pp. 118 - 180, p. 139). He confirmed this in a New York Times letter on 7th February; ‘Johnson was fully aware of the Viet Cong Order of Battle Debate.’ (p. 143.) Maxwell Taylor also wrote in the Washington Post that he had been aware as well. In any case, intelligence estimates were not limited to these channels, for example, the NSA also provided independent information.

103 Ibid., p. 131.

104 Ibid., p. 135.
maintaining the conviction that they could win, even if this was in the face of considerable contradictory evidence.

**The Johnson Administration: Positive Illusions?**

In mid-January 1967, General Wheeler told Johnson that ‘the adverse military tide has been reversed and General Westmoreland has the initiative.’\(^{105}\) The U.S. ‘can win the war if we apply pressure on the enemy relentlessly in the North and South.’ In April 1967, General Westmoreland himself gave a briefing at the White House, in which he said that the enemy numbers within South Vietnam had reached a limit at around 287,000 and that for the first time the ‘cross-over’ point had been reached in the northernmost area, meaning that enemy casualties and defections were greater than the rate that replacements were being recruited. Thus, he claimed ‘the US was winning the war of attrition.’\(^{106}\) Johnson may therefore have been correct to believe, on the basis of this advice (even if wrong), that the war might be winnable. With regard to the bombing campaign too, ‘during the year-long deliberations of 1964-65 ... [officials] were warned by intelligence agencies not to count too heavily on Hanoi’s changing course, but even the most pessimistic intelligence estimates conceded some likelihood of success.’ Thus, Johnson did not necessarily plod on with what was inevitably going to fail. However, this begs the question of why other decision-makers remained optimistic.

Assessments by other military leaders certainly gave overly optimistic views. David Halberstam notes that, in contrast to the views of many at the front, there was a widespread ‘false optimism’ among high-ranking Americans in Saigon (which struck him ‘as essentially self-deception’), including a ‘seemingly unshakable optimism’ on the part of U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.\(^{107}\) Bunker apparently believed his generals assurances that ‘everything was on schedule and that there was an inevitability to the victory we sought, given the awesome force we had mounted against the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong.’ All this was duly reported back to Washington. As Janis argues, the evidence in the Department of Defense’s own study of the bombing implies that ‘the members of the policy-making group were overoptimistic about defeating North Vietnam by means of bombing raids during 1964 and 1965.’\(^{108}\) Many of Johnson’s civilian advisors believed North Vietnam could be coerced by threats against its population and economy, which led to the wholly unsuccessful Rolling Thunder air campaign of 1965-68.\(^{109}\) The Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis E. LeMay (and his successor, General John P. McConnell, as well as battlefield commanders) believed that ‘the military task confronting us is to make it so expensive for the North Vietnamese that they will stop their aggression against South Vietnam and Laos. If we make it too expensive for them, they will stop.’\(^{110}\) This confidence was expressed more widely as well, ‘within the government and the

\(^{105}\) Ibid., p. 147.
\(^{106}\) Ibid., p. 124.
\(^{110}\) Ibid., p. 180.
press, it was frequently argued that North Vietnam was bound to yield when it reached some “pain level”.¹¹¹

However, a report by the Policy Planning Council concluded that ‘bombing would not work and predicted, prophetically, that it would imprison the American government… This remarkable study was ignored. [Walt] Rostow, who was committed to the bombing, never brought it to the president’s attention.’¹¹² George Ball remained a critic and ‘every week, in the “Tuesday lunch group,” Ball would voice his concern with the administration’s assumptions about Vietnam. The others would listen politely then proceed to ignore him, all the while feeling good that a critical perspective had been taken into account.’¹¹³ Hence, Johnson must have heard some, if not all, of the negative reports. The problem was that his decisions did not seem to reflect them, as highlighted by Janis:

‘The Pentagon Papers bear out [Daniel] Ellsberg’s contention that the policy-makers were aware of at least some of the pessimistic estimates contained in these [various CIA, State and Defense Department] reports. But there is no evidence to show that President Johnson and his principal advisers personally accepted the invariably pessimistic estimates in the intelligence reports or took seriously the likelihood that further major escalations of the type outlined in the contingency plans prepared by assistant secretaries and other lower-echelon officials would actually be needed. The Pentagon Papers indicate that on some important occasions the dire forecasts were simply ignored. In the late fall of 1964, for example, the high hopes of President Johnson and his principal advisers that Operation Rolling Thunder would break the will of North Vietnam were evidently not diminished by the fact that the entire intelligence community, according to the Department of Defense study, “tended toward a pessimistic view.” About a year and a half later, the CIA repeatedly estimated that stepping up the bombing of North Vietnam’s oil-storage facilities would not “cripple Communist military operations,” and the policy-makers were aware of this prediction. Instead of accepting it, however, they apparently accepted the optimistic estimate from the Pentagon, which asserted that the bombing would “bring the enemy to the conference table or cause the insurgency to whither from lack of support”.’¹¹⁴

Expectations of eventual success held sway in the upper echelons of the administration. Janis noted a ‘confidence in ultimate victory despite repeated setbacks and failures.’ As late as 1968 Walt Rostow declared that ‘History will salute us.’ Johnson’s Press Secretary, Bill Moyers, said after resigning that in the Johnson inner circle ‘there was a confidence, it was never bragged about, it was just there – a residue, perhaps of the confrontation over the missiles in Cuba – that

when the chips were really down, the other people would fold.' John Stoessinger suggested that ‘perhaps the essential truth about Lyndon Johnson and the men who made Vietnam policy during his presidency was that they had never experienced the kind of pain or tragedy that is the source of empathy. These men had only been successful, and their vision was limited to the American experience.’ Chester Cooper also noted over-optimism from 1964 right up to the final months of the Johnson administration: ‘The optimistic predictions that flowered from time to time ... reflected genuinely held beliefs. While occasional doubts crossed the minds of some, perhaps all, the conviction that the war would end “soon” and favourably was clutched to the breast like a child’s security blanket. Views to the contrary were not favourably received.’ In the post-war Westmoreland vs. CBS trial, Rusk testified that ‘he believed that the war could be won militarily – that is, the US could deny the achievement of Hanoi’s goal.’ Others also remained positive that they could win over what Senator Thomas Dodd called ‘a few thousand primitive guerrillas.’ Johnson himself, though loathing the war that was destroying his plans to develop the ‘Great Society’ at home, nevertheless appears to have expected eventual victory against ‘that raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country.’ ‘Confident of his own power,’ Tuchman writes, ‘Johnson believed he could achieve both his aims, domestic and foreign, at once.’

But the bombing was not bringing results. At least by the middle of the air campaign it should have been clear that the ‘guerrilla warfare required little in the way of supplies and next to nothing at all from North Vietnam,’ and this was made widely known during the Senate Hearings in August 1967. The CIA/DIA report of November 1967 stated ‘there have been no indications that difficulties associated with the bombing have been sufficient to force the regime to alter its policy on the war.’ Another independent study on the bombing from Harvard and MIT was commissioned by the Institute of Defence Analysis, which similarly concluded that ‘effects on North Vietnam’s will to fight and on Hanoi’s appraisal of the cost of continuing to fight “have not shown themselves in any tangible way.” Bombing had not created serious difficulties in transportation, the economy or morale.’ The authors of the report thought that, if anything, enemy resolve had been heightened as a result (a phenomenon that was already well-known from the experience of strategic bombing in WW II): ‘The expectation that bombing would erode the determination of Hanoi and its people clearly overestimated the persuasive and disruptive effects of the bombing and, correspondingly, underestimated the tenacity and recuperative capabilities of

115 Ibid., p. 120.
120 Ibid., p. 321.
121 Ibid., p. 319.
123 Ibid., p. 194.
the North Vietnamese. The study was later reviewed by the Institute of Defense Analysis which, against the insistence of the Air Force’s claims, found that ‘we are unable to devise a bombing campaign in the North to reduce the flow of infiltrating personnel into SVN [South Vietnam].’

While the military apparently remained confident (officially), the pessimism of the other intelligence reports finally succeeded in raising doubts among policy-makers. McNamara had received two detailed reports (August 1966 and May 1967) from the CIA ‘forecasting that no matter how large a force the US military fielded in South Vietnam, the war there was unwinnable.’ For McNamara at least, the accumulating information began to dispel any positive illusions he had that they were going to win. In private he began to ‘show a dawning recognition of futility.’ Such views had always quietly left the White House with those who held them (Hilsman left in 1964, Bundy in 1966 then, voluntarily, George Ball and Bill Moyers in 1966). Congress, at least, still needed convincing, and the military were becoming more outspoken at the restraints imposed upon them. The Armed Services Committee held hearings to investigate these issues in August 1967. McNamara gave a presentation that rejected a positive assessment of the war:

‘He cited evidence to show that the bombing program had not significantly reduced the flow of men and supplies, and he disputed the military advice to lift restraints and allow a greater target range. “We have no reason to believe that it would break the will of the North Vietnamese people or sway the purpose of their leaders ... or provide any confidence that they can be bombed to the negotiating table.” Thus, the whole purpose of American strategy was admitted to be futile by the Secretary of Defense. By revealing the open rift between civilian and military, the testimony created a sensation.’

Then came the Tet offensive of January 1968 that totally undermined the ‘relentless military optimism’ that was being reported back to Washington. Even the optimists’ illusions were now being dispelled. McNamara left the government following Tet. This appears to have had a crucial effect on decision-making. The new Secretary of Defence, Clark Clifford, was ‘ordered by Johnson to make a complete review of US strategy in Vietnam. To his astonishment, Clifford could not find a single senior officer who believed that the war could be won using the methods the USA was employing.’ The full U.S. superior might was never fully unleashed, because the military’s requests were constantly tempered by political pressure to avoid escalating numbers of men and materials sent out to Vietnam. But this had already crept up to half a million troops. ‘In July [1967], Johnson had placed a ceiling on the escalation of ground forces at 525,000, just over

129 Ibid., p. 345.
the figure General Leclerc, 21 years before, had declared would be required, “and even then it could not be done”.  

Indeed, this was not enough. Following the Tet offensive, Westmoreland’s request for a further 200,000 troops was daunting, but ‘mentally locked in the belief that superior force must prevail, Johnson was not ready to negotiate or disengage on any terms that could be construed as “losing”.’ At this point it becomes clear that Johnson had been over-optimistic about the outcome all along. Even Leclerc’s pessimistic estimate of the necessary troop numbers had been increased on the basis of new information and experience. In 1965, when he was considering whether to commit ground troops, Johnson had been ‘warned that attainment of U.S. objectives would require 700,000 to 1,000,000 men and 7 years of warfare in order to force the communists from the field and to pacify the south. Such a level of commitment was beyond what the Johnson administration ever considered.’ Johnson, it seemed, had not updated, and believed they could achieve some kind of victory even without the forces others told him would be necessary to achieve it. ‘Because he believed he could not lose, Johnson dropped still more bombs and sent still more men to their death.’ Even George Ball, the constant critic, announced in 1966 that ‘the one thing we have to do is to win this damned war.’

After years of receiving information denouncing the chance of victory, Johnson himself eventually began to open up to reality. He lamented in his 1966 State of the Union speech that ‘War is always the same. It is young men dying in the fullness of their promise. It is trying to kill a man that you do not even know well enough to hate. Therefore, to know war is to know that there is still madness in this world.’ His rating in the polls for handling the war went negative for the first time in mid-1966, following the Air Force’s admission that they had hit a civilian area of Hanoi, and his support never recovered.

‘It was slowly becoming clear to Johnson that there was no way the Vietnam entanglement could end to his advantage. Military success could not end the war within the eighteen months left of his present term, and with an election ahead, he could not disengage and “lose” Vietnam. The Reserves, the casualties, the public protest would have to be faced. He was caught and, in Moyer’s judgment, “He knew it. He sensed the war would destroy him politically and wreck his presidency. He was a miserable man”.’

Johnson himself appears to have suffered from the poor advice of others with over-optimistic expectations of victory. Even so, it was he who made the decisions to escalate, hinting at an optimism of his own that success was at least possible despite the huge problems ranged against them. As for the tremendous criticism that seemed to go unheeded, one is reminded of Johnson’s

133 Ibid., p. 349.
own view that ‘being president is like being a jackass in a hailstorm. There’s nothing to do but
stand there and take it.’

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION (1968 – 1974)

Vietnam would yet claim more miserable presidents, of course. I will treat Nixon only briefly
here, because it was clear by this time that the war was not likely to be won militarily, and the
major drawbacks to U.S. involvement were already clear. Nixon had backed U.S. military
intervention very early on when Vice-President for Eisenhower in 1954, recommending that they
send combat troops if Indochina could not be ‘saved’ in another way. Once President, after
campaigning on the basis of finally extracting the U.S. from Vietnam, Nixon ended up executing
the war with increasing ferocity, just as his predecessors had done. He did withdraw troops, but
the air campaign was ratcheted up several notches. Bombing had failed to work before, but the
bombings under Nixon were of unprecedented severity and scope, in many ways taking the war
to a whole new level of violence, secretly expanding it into supposed enemy bases in Cambodia.
At this time, North Vietnam reduced their guerrilla tactics in favour of large-scale conventional
military action by the North Vietnamese Army. While air power is usually ineffective against
civilian or infra-structural targets, it is effective against conventional military offensive forces.
Thus, although argued not to have been recognised by Washington at the time, it was Hanoi’s
switch to conventional methods that was responsible for the successes of Nixon’s 1972 bombing
campaigns (plus the fact that Nixon imposed lesser demands than Johnson), not the merits of the
new U.S. bombing strategy itself.

Hanoi conceded to U.S. demands on 21 October 1972. This nearly failed when the South
stalled over the details of the proposed agreement, triggering the North to back off again. In
response, Nixon resumed a devastating tirade in the ‘Christmas bombings’ of 18 to 25 December,
which rapidly brought them back to the table. In January, a treaty was finalised and the war, for
the U.S. at least, was finally over.

Nixon had continued to believe in the U.S. capacity to ‘win’. For him, winning did not
mean defeating the North, but preventing the North from defeating the South. He claims to
have achieved this, and that the failure of the U.S. Congress and public to maintain the South
Vietnamese government after the U.S. withdrawal was responsible for ‘losing the peace.’ His
policy paid off, it seems, largely thanks to a coincidental change of military strategy by the North
Vietnamese which exposed them to attack from the air, rather than due to the eventual success of
American strategy. Even so, Nixon ‘still believes that the war was won, while seminars and
symposia assemble to inquire why it was lost.’

---

93-128.
When Saigon finally fell to the communists in 1975, Dean Rusk, a key decision-maker throughout 1960s Vietnam policy, admitted that ‘personally, I made two mistakes. I underestimated the tenacity of the North Vietnamese and overestimated the patience of the American people.’ In many ways, this characterized a majority of the U.S. decision-makers throughout the Vietnam conflict.

VIEW FROM THE NORTH: HANOI’S PERCEPTIONS

Recent work suggests that the North Vietnamese forces and their civilian support base never had any intention of giving up. As with so many other guerrilla wars, national movements may never concede so long as popular will to resist remains. As we saw from the failure of Johnson’s bombing campaigns, the insurgency in South Vietnam was sustainable even in total independence from the North. Kennedy’s insight that Vietnam could not be won without the will of its own people became the conclusion as well as his prophecy. In a sense then, the North justifiably maintained confidence that they would prevail, even against a vastly superior opponent. They had good evidence to support this, most notably their defeat of the French. They only needed to do again what they had done before: not to actually inflict defeat but to fight for longer than the U.S. was prepared to do. Ho Chi Minh said, as early as 1946, ‘kill ten of our men and we will kill one of yours. In the end, it is you who will tire.’ The U.S.’s own studies ‘of North Vietnam’s responses indicated to Washington “a deep conviction in Hanoi that our resolve will falter because of the cost of the struggle.” The analysts were correct. Hanoi’s intransigence was indeed tied to a belief that the United States, whether from cost or from rising dissent, would tire first. One U.S. report on the bombing campaign noted that ‘the regime continues to send thousands of young men and women abroad for higher education and technical training; we consider this evidence of the regime’s confidence of the eventual outcome of the war.

There are some indications that the North was overly optimistic in launching the Tet offensive in 1968, in which they were greatly outnumbered (and in the end, suffered a military defeat): ‘Nothing was said to the attack echelons about replacements or escape routes. The unique form of this plan, coupled with its scale, indicates that the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese supporters were confident of a victory.’ Decision-makers in Hanoi also expected the offensive to spark a popular uprising across the country, which never materialized. Part of this apparent over-optimism in the Tet offensive may have been due to poor information, in which case it does not necessarily implicate positive illusions. Vietnamese General Tran Va Tra wrote: ‘During Tet of 1968 we did not correctly evaluate the specific balance of forces between ourselves and the

---

enemy, and did not fully realize that the enemy still had considerable capabilities and that our capabilities were limited.'\textsuperscript{151} Michael Handel also suggests that Tet was based on insufficient information.\textsuperscript{152} Nevertheless, in support of the possibility that positive illusions did play some role, General Tran Va Tra also wrote that the objectives ‘were beyond our actual strength … [and based] in part on an illusion of our subjective desires.’\textsuperscript{153}

But Tet need not have been based solely on a North Vietnamese belief that they would win. General Giap knew that a major offensive at this point could intensify U.S. domestic opinion against the war and, additionally, strain the fragile cooperation of the U.S.-South Vietnamese relationship. Both of these were achieved. Thus, even the vastly costly Tet offensive, thought seemingly over-ambitious, may have been a North Vietnamese strategy to achieve rational goals.\textsuperscript{154}

At other times too, captured documents attested to a realistic appreciation by the North of their limitations and their failures in the face of successful U.S. operations such as Junction City in 1967. The numerous captured documents were ‘not the record of a revolutionary force buoyed up by anticipation of final victory.’\textsuperscript{155} In other words, the VC/NVA forces appeared not to have had any positive illusions, whether or not their leaders may have done. Only at the very end of the conflict did the North appear to hold optimistic views about the chances of winning the war outright. On 2 May 1972 Kissinger met with North Vietnam’s negotiator, Le Duc Tho, who rejected all American proposals because of, according to Kissinger, ‘Hanoi’s conviction that it was so close to victory that it no longer needed even the pretense of negotiations.’\textsuperscript{156}

**GENERAL CONCLUSIONS**

**Are Existing Explanations Enough to Explain U.S. Policy in Vietnam?**

Information was at times faulty, misunderstood, not always negative, and sometimes withheld from the White House. Moreover, there were alternative pressures for escalation: the concern for halting communism; U.S. credibility on the international stage; domestic political pressures; public and electoral concerns; the need to keep up pressure to win concessions should it come to negotiated settlement with North Vietnam; the ‘lessons of history’ not to appease aggression; and the mistaken analogies of Korea and the British experience in Malaya (Korea had been a failure, the British campaign in Malaya had taken 12 years against a much more vulnerable foe).\textsuperscript{157} While

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 172-173.
\textsuperscript{156} Kissinger, H.A. (1979) *White House Years* Little Brown, Boston, p. 1175.
\textsuperscript{157} May, E.R. (1973) *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* Oxford University Press, Oxford See Chapter IV, ‘Vietnam: The Bed of Procrustes.’ In general, May found that ‘It is quite clear that beliefs about at least the very recent past penetrated the thinking of men who determined America’s course of action in Vietnam,’ p. 114.
these existing explanations provide an understanding of why the war in Vietnam was fought and continued, they do not explain the origin of the contention that it was possible to win, especially in the face of contradictory evidence. It is not enough to argue that leaders chose to fight simply because they felt compelled to, or that they had to appease domestic political pressure. Clearly, such factors did play a role, but it would be difficult to defend the argument that, without an expectation of victory, they alone explained the continued commitment and escalation by a variety of different leaders over 27 years. The very existence of continued controversy demonstrates that current explanations do not provide a satisfactory explanation for why the U.S. kept burning itself with Vietnam. Moreover, the widely noted discrepancy between facts and policy continue to prompt researchers to revert to supplementary psychological and non-rational explanations to fill the gap in otherwise neat theories (such as Janis’ ‘groupthink,’ Tuchman’s ‘folly,’ or Jervis’ range of misperceptions). It is quite clear from individuals’ viewpoints in the Pentagon Papers and other sources, as well as from their actions, that despite the difficulties, key decision-makers believed that the U.S. would prevail. Four lines of evidence support this argument.

First, key clues about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam come from the empirical facts about U.S. actions (rather than statements). The escalations can hardly be argued to simply pander to domestic or international pressure to increase effort. The escalations were so large, and specifically based on requirements from military commanders, that one can rule out the idea that they were mere signals of resolve. No, they were designed to win the war. Thus, the massive U.S. escalations (especially in 1965 and 1967) imply a belief that victory was possible, and reject the idea that the war was continued simply on the basis of political pressures. Robert McNamara told President Johnson that ‘in my judgement we must go on bending every effort to win,’ and Johnson himself ‘wanted do whatever was necessary to win in Vietnam.’ Each president appeared to maintain an optimism that some kind of victory would eventually come, however painful and costly it might be along the way. ‘Every American escalation in the air or on the ground was an expression of the hope that a few more bombs, a few more troops, would bring decisive victory.’

Second, alternative explanations hinge on the fact that once committed, there were few escape options. But this assumption is questionable. The changeover of presidencies always presented the opportunity to review policy. Of course, many external factors affected the different administrations in similar ways, but each new President, simply by virtue of being the new president, had a chance to consider exit options. Indeed, in 1964 Johnson was elected partly on

---

159 One may counter this claim with the argument that U.S. decision-makers were fighting and escalating to attain better bargaining chips in a negotiated solution. But even if this were true, at the very least, they must have believed that increased military action would improve the situation in their favour (otherwise the bargaining chips would not exist).
the basis of a relatively dovish manifesto which contrasted that of his hawkish opponent, Barry Goldwater. Johnson had publicly declared that ‘we are not going to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.’ Of course, once in office, the options actually available to a new president may change because they suddenly gain access to privileged information, and this might alter their outlook and decisions. But this should not have affected the Johnson administration because they simply continued in office after Kennedy’s assassination. Nevertheless, for the other presidents, each new administration is expected to make some changes, and at these times some settlement or scaling down from Vietnam was feasible, if still a huge political burden. David Kaiser, Fredrik Logevall and Barbara Tuchman argue that it should have been clear to U.S. policy-makers – at the time – that withdrawal offered a better option than escalation. This is of course an easy argument to make today with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, most people agreed that the communist conquest of South Vietnam had to be prevented, and even by the end of Johnson’s term, those who favoured escalation outnumbered those who favoured withdrawal. So perhaps escape options were few and undesirable. But this begs the question: If they were willing to fight instead, they must have expected that fighting was the better option. It is difficult to argue they did so without an expectation that they would win—somehow and however long it took.

Third, the hypothesis that the various presidents were pushed into escalation because of domestic politics does not stand up to a wider scope of analysis. If it was really just domestic political pressure that was responsible for U.S. involvement in Vietnam, then one would predict that the U.S. leaders would not want to become involved after Nixon had already withdrawn the American military (i.e. we would expect no desire to fight in subsequent administrations). However, this is not true. Nixon’s successor, Gerald Ford, despite being released from the domestic pressures that had been acting on previous presidents’ Vietnam policy, actually tried to get involved in Vietnam again, but this was blocked by Congress: ‘The Ford administration failed in convincing Congress of the need to reintervene in the war, or even of the need to provide emergency military assistance to South Vietnam.’ If positive illusions about American capabilities were partly responsible for U.S. policy in Vietnam, then Ford would be expected to share a belief that they could maintain a free South Vietnam – as the other presidents had – even after the complications of domestic politics were removed from the issue.

Fourth, domestic political constraints on Johnson may not have been as great as often assumed. The year of the fateful decision to send combat troops, 1965, was according to Vice President Humphrey ‘the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson administration.’

---

163 Tuchman, B. (1984) _The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam_ Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 314. One wonders if Johnson thought at the time that the ‘Asian boys’ would be able to do it, whether or not they ought to.


David Kaiser notes that ‘the Johnson administration did not decide upon the war out of a fear of a right-wing backlash, or because of a belief that Congress or the American public demanded it.’

In early 1965, following Johnson’s landslide election victory and before the critical decisions of whether to commit ground troops to fight or not, ‘the lack of any real political pressure to go to war had never been more apparent’ (especially given his campaign as the peace candidate against Goldwater).

The concerns of political backlash for ‘losing Vietnam’ as the Democrats had lost China, and the McCarthy inspired dread of communism, did not impose paralysing constraints on the U.S. administration. Especially following the successful U.S. handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Diem’s assassination in Saigon, they had an opportunity and a reason to consider exiting from Vietnam.

In combination, the traditional explanations of communist containment, U.S. reputation and their interaction with domestic politics, do not, on their own, provide a satisfactory explanation for why America continued to fight the Vietnam War. The often cited view that escalation begat escalation, so that the military ‘machine’ simply became sucked into something from which it was impossible to extricate itself, has been rejected. U.S. leaders ‘always had considerable freedom about which way to go in the war,’ and Kennedy had already set a precedent for prudence by deciding not to intervene militarily in Laos. Logevall and Tuchman highlight various opportunities for exiting the war throughout the U.S. involvement. Many of these came at times when American prestige need not have taken a large fall as a result – even given the political pressures to maintain a commitment. To sum up this section, therefore, existing explanations are not enough to fully account for the U.S. escalation in Vietnam without the acknowledgement of an expectation among decision-makers that they would eventually achieve favourable gains, if not victory.

This is not to say that they blithely expected it. As much as they might have hoped for such a victory, all of the U.S. presidents would have loved to get out of the Vietnam War. It was only because they were already fighting it that they had to find a way to win. The problem was that none of them were willing to accept defeat as the price of withdrawal. George Ball eventually seemed to admit that such a cost might be worth taking, but this came too late to hinder the decision to send combat troops in 1965. Those most against escalating the war held out for some ‘third way,’ such as a non-aligned government, or a negotiated settlement, that would end the conflict without letting the communists triumph. Yet the notion that war could be avoided while ensuring a South Vietnam free from communism was a bigger illusion than any.

---

168 Ibid., p. 391.
172 Richard Betts, personal communication.
Did Positive Illusions Contribute to U.S. Policy in Vietnam?

Escalating the war when there was ample and systematic evidence from the military, the Secretary of Defence, the CIA, advisors, diplomats, other nations, and sometimes – in the case of Kennedy – themselves, that it was unwinnable suggests that decision-makers maintained positive illusions that the U.S. would eventually win. Note that for my argument, it doesn’t matter whether Vietnam was really ‘winnable’ or not. I am only arguing that policy-makers perceived that it was. Johnson may have given up on this hope in the final year of his presidency, and Nixon’s aims were surely more limited in scope, but each administration nevertheless escalated the war as if to extract a victory that was eventually sure to come. This is consistent with positive illusions. The U.S. government’s perseverance, so starkly contrasting with much of the prevailing intelligence, was suggested by Jeffrey Race to represent ‘an unconscious alteration in the estimate of probabilities.’ Irving Janis’ study of biases in group decision-making found that in the case of Vietnam, U.S. policymakers remained ‘blissfully optimistic about the prospects for success.’

One has to be cautious about this of course: Expecting a U.S. victory in Vietnam was not wholly unjustified at all stages of the war. Indeed, at the beginning of Johnson’s second term, Tuchman suggests that ‘no one doubted’ that the United States would be able to ‘accomplish its aim by superior might.’ It would also be a mistake to claim that all intelligence and analysis unambiguously pointed to defeat. The situation was hugely complex and one could find reasons to think things would improve. Indeed, American analysts could often identify tangible military gains. The leadership could thus, at times, take logical confidence from military successes (whether genuine or not) that some kind of victory would be possible in the future. Nevertheless, even John Garofano, who believes that the war was ‘a combination of structural pressures, entrenched mind-sets, and limited information,’ notes that at the critical time:

‘a general sense of, if not optimism, then can-do-ism, characterize the preponderance of military advice in the spring and summer of 1965. It is found in the weekly summaries of the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, which made their way to the White House; in General Johnson’s March 1965 report following his trip to Vietnam; in the

April 1965 Honolulu Conference; and most of all during the July plenary meetings, at which senior military leaders had an open floor with the president.\footnote{Garofano, J. (2000) ‘Deciding on Military Intervention: What Is the Role of Senior Military Leaders?’ Naval War College Review 53: 1-19, p. 12.} Hence, even if Vietnam is largely explained as the least bad alternative to the costs of inaction, forcing decision-makers to accept the risks of military intervention, positive illusions may help to explain why they were willing to take these risks. Kaiser reports that newly released telephone conversations ‘show beyond doubt, Johnson, Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy undertook the war and overrode the well-founded doubts of some important subordinates simply because they believed it had to be done and had confidence in the nation’s ability to do it.’\footnote{Kaiser, D. (2000) American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 6.} Several officials close to Kennedy and Johnson reported a ‘sense of omnipotence’ before the Bay of Pigs invasion and again following Johnson’s 1964 election, leading them to think that they had a ‘golden touch.’\footnote{Janis, I.L. (1972) Victims of Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes Houghton Mifflin, Boston, p. 105. Janis thought this meant that ‘they shared a staunch faith that somehow everything would come out right, despite all the gloomy predictions in the intelligence reports prepared by their underlings.’} Positive illusions need not lead to expectations of outright victory per se. Rather they may lead to expectations of gains, of whatever form, greater than the evidence would predict. As Irving Janis noted, ‘the possibility of defeat does not preclude a strong element of wishful thinking and even a strong dose of over-optimism about limited hopes such as escaping with their skins intact, successfully postponing defeat indefinitely, and holding out long enough for a lucky break to turn the tide in their favour.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 106.} Indeed, while there is much evidence that negative omens went unheeded, decision-makers were not completely blind to reality:

‘it certainly cannot be said that they maintained grossly overoptimistic illusions about the overall security of the military enterprise in Vietnam. Yet at times there may have been a more limited type of illusion that inclined the policy-makers to be willing to take long-shot gambles. Many observations suggest that the group experienced some temporary lapses in realism about the grave material, political and moral risks of escalation. The lapses were caused by shared illusions that “everything will go our way, none of the dangers will seriously affect us”.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 121.}

Janis attributes this to groupthink, but it is also indicative of more fundamental positive illusions (both are likely to contribute to an overall explanation). The lapses of realism, the variation in expectations depending on feedback, the gloomier predictions closer to the battlefield, and the insensitivity to risk once in the implementation stage of the war all conform to antecedent conditions of positive illusions (described in Chapter 3).

In addition to over-optimism in military objectives, in the case of Vietnam there were deeper illusions too, about the very nature of the conflict. As so many authors have exposed, the
U.S. mistakenly treated what was essentially a revolutionary war as a conventional one, and focused on military means to fight it. Kennedy thought that the U.S. could stimulate the South to win because they were fighting for freedom, but according to Tuchman ‘the assumption that humanity at large shared the democratic Western idea of freedom was an American delusion.’

The idea is encapsulated in a U.S. Army Colonel’s quip from Stanley Kubrick’s film Full Metal Jacket, ‘We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out.’ A recent book argues that cultural misunderstandings between the U.S. and Vietnam, particularly of American’s perceived superiority of western civilization and its institutions, pervade throughout the entire history of U.S.-Vietnam relations and significantly contributed to the outbreak of the war. General Maxwell Taylor was one person who sometimes did seem aware of such problematic assumptions, reporting in 1965 that ‘the Vietnamese have the manpower and the basic skills to win this war. What they lack is motivation.’

Ernest May believes that the presidents’ and their advisors’ simplistic historical reasoning had critically misleading influences on their faith in the war. The main analogies they invoked had no substantive relevance to Vietnam, and he suggested that studying the history and culture of Vietnam would have improved their assessments of what was realistically possible:

‘By reading them [Vietnam’s history and culture], men making decisions about Vietnam might have discovered at the outset some truths later painfully learned ... it might also have led to the recognition that the conflict in Vietnam was in many if not most respects a civil war, the determining forces of which were outgrowths of the Vietnamese past and likely to be affected only marginally by foreigners.’

It was not that the relevant information was poor, absolving U.S. decisions. The information was plainly available – Taylor’s report above lamenting a lack of South Vietnamese will to fight formed ‘one of the longest cables in the history of American diplomacy,’ but this and similar warnings were not registered. McNamara would later write that, ‘I didn’t think these people had the capacity to fight this way. If I had thought they could take this punishment and fight this well, could enjoy fighting like this, I would have thought differently at the start.’ He and others had thought they were fighting communism, but they were fighting nationalism. People on the ground were aware of this and were reporting it back – the U.S. failed to reflect it in its policy.

Robert Pape concurs on this view of tangible aims in his analysis of the U.S. bombing campaigns, also implying the crucial importance of accounting for enemy goals, rather than of U.S. goals:

‘American leaders, both civilian and military, paid insufficient attention to the relationship between American military action and the enemy’s goals. Proponents of Schelling and Douhet strategies considered means of attacking civilian morale but failed to consider how firm North Vietnamese morale might actually be. Similarly, proponents of interdiction strategies during 1965 – 1968 planned operations for attacking military targets but failed to consider how much difference destruction of those targets would make to Hanoi’s military strategy. Consequently, American leaders failed to realize that no coercive air power strategy could have succeeded during 1965 – 1968.’

In other words, victory on the ground or air was not achievable by military means. As John Garofano put it: ‘Civilians and military officers alike overestimated the efficacy of airpower ... and neglected the importance of domestic support for the insurgency.’ Kaiser confirms this view: ‘the loss of the war stemmed not from a failure in civil-military relations but from a failure of either the civilian or the military leadership to understand the nature of the conflict and to define realistic American objectives and strategies.’ As a result, McNamara’s famous statistic were irrelevant: ‘They overlooked the fact that even if the South Vietnamese forces outnumbered the Vietcong by a ratio of ten to one, it did no good because the one man was willing to fight and die and the ten were not,’ as Ho had claimed. T.L. Cubbage, a Major in the U.S. intelligence service in Vietnam corroborates this view:

‘... If the war in Vietnam involved an intelligence failure, it was a general one, namely, the inability to understand the nature of modern guerrilla warfare. The US military continued to think in terms of fighting another conventional Second World War or Korea. The enemy’s motivation and strategy were misunderstood, as was the connection between what happened on the battlefield and domestic politics at home ... the US military and intelligence

---

188 Pape, R.A. (1996) Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, p. 210. The ‘Schelling strategy’ is to gradually raise the cost of punishment inflicted on enemy infrastructure targets, aiming to coerce them to negotiate; the ‘Douhet strategy’ is to bomb the civilian population to induce an antigovernment revolt or concessions.

189 Some – notably military – sources claim that the U.S. could have succeeded in their objectives in Vietnam. This ‘winnable’ school argues that the war was not won because of political restrictions on the military. They argue that unrestricted bombing, invasion of the North and a blockade of Haiphong harbour (where supplies were flowing in throughout the conflict) would have won and ended the war much more quickly. It has even been suggested that the blatant signals that the U.S. would not do this was a major mistake: Keeping the North guessing about U.S. intentions by, for example, maintaining landing troops off North Vietnam would have threatened a greater disaster. As it was, the North knew they could carry on reaching out to fight in the south while being largely untouchable in the North (apart from the bombing, of course). See Hess, G.H. (1990) Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War Twayne, Boston, p. 174; See also Sorley, L. (1999) A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam Harcourt, New York.


community ... failed to understand the overall political implications of fighting a war that cannot be won militarily.193

Both Ho Chi Minh and Johnson miscalculated the other’s intentions. Neither side thought the other would fight as long and hard as they did.194 As Gary Hess wrote, ‘the American command’s delusion that the body count could bring victory underestimated North Vietnam’s determination and capability … intelligence sources correctly predicted that the North Vietnamese would indefinitely replace losses inflicted by the American search-and-destroy strategy.’195 ‘This is not peculiar to the Vietnam War; small nationalist movements often win conflicts even where the odds are weighed heavily against them. Guerrilla strategies are difficult to defeat because national movements have extremely high resolve that can be sustained indefinitely, and because conventional war-fighting strategies are ineffective against a dispersed enemy with a largely invisible support base.’196 This applies to coercion from the air as well; during the Johnson years ‘North Vietnam was largely immune to conventional coercion.’197 Even historical precedents recent to the Vietnam conflict argued against success, but it seems that ‘so far as one can discern from available documents and memoirs, no one inquired what precise effects the bombing would achieve towards altering North Vietnamese policy.’198 Decision-makers were simply optimistic that it would work.

If existing theories for the U.S. involvement in Vietnam offered a satisfactory explanation, they probably would not have proved so controversial. The debate seems to rage on because the remaining pieces of the puzzle do not quite fit. These gaps can be understood by recognizing that U.S. military supremacy was not questioned – U.S. decision-makers were biased to expect victory. But where did that conviction come from, if it was not forthcoming from the prevailing intelligence of Washington’s own assessments? I suggest that this systematic conviction was maintained, in part, by decision-makers being subject to positive illusions that led them to over-confidence in over-estimating their capabilities, under-estimating the enemy, neglecting intelligence, and to inflating the probability of victory. The problem of hindsight is of course that, had the U.S. won, policy might not have been classified as overly optimistic. But standing this argument on its head, the benefit of hindsight is knowing that in the end, the U.S. was too optimistic in its expectations. And even if they had won, the same evidence presented here would demonstrate that they nevertheless over-estimated their capability and under-estimated the difficulty, so that the war became more costly and required more than was expected. Positive illusions are one possible source of this over-optimism.

Was Information Really Negative, or Just Ambiguous?

I presented considerable evidence of advice against escalation in Vietnam. A critic could argue that, while these negative assessments did indeed exist, the overall information was, at best, ambiguous. If that is true, one can argue that each president simply drew a wrong conclusion from the same poor data: i.e. that the war was worth pursuing. Indeed, intelligence analyses were sometimes hugely ambiguous. For example, following the 1963 Saigon riots, Kennedy had sent a mission to Vietnam headed by an advisor to the JCS Chairman and a State Department official with experience in Vietnam. Their reports differed so extremely that Kennedy was compelled to ask them, ‘You two did visit the same country, didn’t you?’ Later, Johnson would be faced with similar contradictions arising from the widely divergent assessments of enemy force strengths made by the CIA and MACV, in which ‘the differences between the estimates was so large it seemed as if each of them had fought a different enemy.’ With such ambiguity, it is possible that the U.S. presidents simply had to make difficult choices based on unclear information.

However, there is considerable evidence that ambiguity, or ambiguous events, are selectively interpreted as confirming evidence for pre-existing beliefs. Thus, if ambiguous information was a problem for the leadership during Vietnam, the likelihood is that, rather than submerging positive illusions, it would have reinforced them in a systematically positive direction. Ambiguity on its own would have predicted U.S. policy at different times to lean either for or against escalation, but policy remained systematically pro-escalation (except for the final withdrawals). This implies that if ambiguity existed it would, if anything, have exacerbated positive illusions.

Political Information Suppression

Throughout the Vietnam War, intelligence was of high volume and was subjected to intense analysis. But the much more important question, as always, is whether this information actually and systematically reached the eyes or ears of the leaders. That seems to have been largely true. Yet, even within Washington, there were infringements of free information flow. This meant that the openness of debate was significantly impaired. Even when information was reported, it

---

200 Handel, M.I. (Ed.) (1989) Leaders and Intelligence, Frank Cass & Co., London, p. 25. This is still unresolved. Handel argues that the limited forces used for the Tet offensive apparently vindicates the lower MACV estimate. Hughes-Wilson suggests that the enormous casualties at Tet indicated that the higher figure must have been true; See Hughes-Wilson, J. (1999) Military Intelligence Blunders, Carroll & Graf, New York.  
201 See, for example, Jervis, R. (1983) 'Deterrence and Perception' International Security 7: 3-30, p. 21 and 24: ‘People not only assimilate incoming information to their pre-existing beliefs ... but do not know they are doing so. Instead, they incorrectly attribute their interpretations of events to the events themselves; they do not realize that their beliefs and expectations play a dominant role. They therefore become too confident because they see many events as providing independent confirmation of their beliefs when, in fact, the events would be seen differently by someone who started with different ideas. Thus people see evidence as less ambiguous than it is, think that their views are steadily being confirmed, and so feel justified in holding to them ever more firmly ... Ambiguous or even discrepant information is ignored, misperceived, or reinterpreted.’  
sometimes came primed with optimism by the messenger. Robert McNamara made numerous purges and political appointments of those around him, in particular within the military chain of command. By doing this he significantly altered the control of information that reached the president, and also prevented the airing of dissenting voices within the White House and before Congress, contrary to constitutional norms. ‘McNamara unashamedly manipulated the Washington political system to ensure that he had total control of all the military advice to the President.’

‘By 1968 no real decisions were being delegated down the US military chain of command. Robert McNamara’s way of dealing with the military was simple: those who disagreed with him he sacked if he could; and if he couldn’t, he sidelined them and choked off their access to the President like some latter-day Renaissance cardinal. Under the Secretary of Defense’s baleful influence, LBJ’s lack of access to any military subordinate with a point of view that differed from Bob McNamara’s would be a major factor in the debacle that was to follow.’

McNamara may also have deliberately selected General Westmoreland as a compliant Commander in Chief of MACV, since according to colleagues it was an unexpected promotion, and this view is corroborated by the fact that he was subsequently promoted (again unexpectedly) to the Chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But it was not only McNamara that exerted a control over information:

‘Field officers who had accompanied ARVN units into combat, and learned in bitterness that American training and weapons could not supply the will to fight, did their best to circumvent General Harkin’s suppression of negative reports and gave their accounts of sorry performance at debriefings in the Pentagon ... the battle at Ap Bac in January 1963 ... bared the failings of ARVN, the inutility of the American program and the hollowness of Headquarters optimism, although no one was allowed to say so. Colonel John Vann, the senior American at Ap Bac, was back at the Pentagon in the summer of 1963 trying to inform the [Army] General Staff. As Maxwell Taylor was the particular patron of General Harkins and held his view, Vann’s message could make no headway. A Defense Department spokesman announced that “The corner has definitely been turned towards victory,” and CINCPAC foresaw the “inevitable” defeat of the Viet-Cong.’

It is not clear how much damage this manipulation may have done to Kennedy and (in particular) Johnson’s ability to make judgements on the basis of all the information that was potentially available, but it is clear that information was not getting through as easily as it should have done. Negative messages were being stalled higher up the decision-making chain as well. In Washington, the inter-agency Working Group on Vietnam exposed a number of key problems. These prompted its chief, Paul Kattenburg of the State Department, to predict that the war would require half a million troops and end up as a five or ten year conflict. He also told a meeting

---

204 Ibid., p. 186.
including Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, Bundy and Vice-President Johnson) that Diem’s failing support implied the U.S. should exit now. Apparently no one present agreed, and Rusk declared that ‘we will not pull out of Vietnam until the war is won’. Kattenburg was removed from the group and put into another post.

Thus, if positive illusions did exist, they seem to have been protected by the closing of debate and violations of democratic process. McNamara and the military appeared to reinforce this sequence of events. Kaiser argues that ‘McNamara and the Pentagon helped hide the true situation from the President, the rest of the government, and the American people, thereby putting off the need to reevaluate American policy.’ This control subverted the constitutional responsibilities for the Chiefs of Staff to report to Congress and not just to the military’s Commander in Chief and the Secretary of Defence. Johnson’s decisions may therefore have been influenced by the incremental optimism added to each report as they moved up from the field, to Saigon, to Washington, to the White House, to the president. Based on this process – on the optimism of others – he may not have assessed the probability of winning as well as he ought. To some extent then, Johnson himself was the victim of other decision-makers’ positive illusions.

Conclusions

The popular idea that bad intelligence led to ill-informed but at-the-time understandable decisions can be rejected. Neither Kennedy nor Johnson can ‘be accused, like Truman in 1950, of over-hasty decision-making. On the contrary, both presidents permitted months of careful staff work and assigned to it some of the ablest minds around them.’ On his decision to leak the Pentagon Papers to the press, Daniel Ellsberg alleged that ‘a succession of American presidents over the course of 20 years ... had been supplied with information and nonetheless had chosen to disregard it. Thus, it was not the government as a whole that was to blame, but one branch of it.’ The puzzle is not that the U.S. government were missing the relevant information on which to base decisions, the puzzle is that they continued to act in contradiction to it. Again, this implicates the decision-makers. They fought on, expecting a victory which was, with the benefit of hindsight, a positive illusion, maintained in the face of dire odds: ‘U.S. analysts recognized the difficulties of [U.S.] strategy; they consistently foresaw the achievement of military objectives as no more than a fifty-fifty proposition.’

Tuchman’s classification of U.S. action in Vietnam as ‘folly’ (which she defines as behaviour contrary to self-interest) fails to identify why this case – or any of the other fiascos in

her book – are subject to the ‘wooden-headedness’ that she ascribes as the chief cause. The failings of Vietnam do indeed appear to contradict the copious prevailing intelligence, as we have seen, but they are more consistent with a deep seated conviction that victory was possible (or at least that tangible gains were), such as predicted by positive illusions, than with the notion that leaders were simply making a series of ridiculous mistakes.

The momentum of the conflict, with all its institutional and social complexities, can be argued to have carried the war into a life of its own. In this view, it can be analogised as a super-tanker, that no president could turn around in a tight circle, or even alter its course easily. It could only be slowed down over the long-term, and only gradual changes were possible in the short-term. Such an analogy may help to explain the ‘serial correlation’ between the different presidents in their similar decisions to continue the war, despite differing initial intentions. Such a hypothesis suggests why the war may have continued even if the decision-makers believed they might eventually lose. The problem with this conception of the issue is the fact that each president did not just continue the war – rather, they escalated it. Not only that, but the military escalations were far larger than were necessary if the object was simply to show resolve or demonstrate continued commitment. They represented an intention to win and a belief that that victory was possible. Furthermore, the ‘super-tanker’ argument is problematic because of the vastly different contexts that each president operated within. None of them were facing identical problems, nor identical options to deal with them. The different presidents act as a dummy variable for diverse political contexts across which a belief in victory remained constant, not as dummies which behaved exactly the same regardless of context. In all of them, there was a confidence that America would eventually win the war, and this justified their escalations.

Even critics of the view that U.S. decision-makers expected victory may find that positive illusions nevertheless help to explain some key instances of optimism. Gelb and Betts, for example, agree that the U.S. Government comprised both ‘genuine’ optimists and pessimists, but they argue that most of the optimism was conscious – to deliberately boost morale of domestic audiences, allies, the military, and the civilian bureaucracy and leadership so they would ‘work and fight hard.’ Their explanation is that the decision-makers did hear and reflect on the negative reports and advice, but that policy decisions were forced by the necessity – and this was often a consensus among both hawks and doves – of the overwhelming goal to contain communism and reach a domestic political compromise. In other words, escalation can be understood (whether or not it was justified) even if the leaders may not have expected to win.

However, as Betts points out, it is important to differentiate between decision-makers’ hopes and expectations. While decision-makers perhaps did not expect any outright victory, they did hope for some advantageous outcome somehow or other. But even if we accept this and judge that there was no belief in victory, the unwarranted hope still demands an explanation. As Betts put it to me: ‘The “positive illusions” argument may help to explain why hope overrode expectation, but presidents rarely expected as much as they hoped for. There were periods of optimism, but fewer than those of pessimism. They hoped they would get lucky, but they were rarely

213 Ibid., p. 3.
Positive illusions may, therefore, even in this potentially more humble role help to explain those periods of optimism – they were important, if scarce, and accompanied many of the greatest escalations of U.S. commitment to the war.

Fredrik Logevall recently argued that several U.S. policy-makers foresaw the disaster, but that the presidents did not take their advice; this view is strongly corroborated by Barbara Tuchman, who holds that decision-makers should have appreciated that escalation would bring disaster. John Garofano criticises the fact that ‘Logevall does not explain why President Johnson did not take their advice. He refers to decisionmaking “rigidity,” but this amounts to a black box of noncausality.’ This suggests a remaining gap in current explanations of U.S. policy on Vietnam, and I suggest that positive illusions offer a compelling solution. Inside that black box may lie positive illusions about capabilities, the ability to control events, and over-optimism about the future. Garofano himself noted that his review ‘points to serious limitations of the rational view of war, which needs to account better for the mind-sets that policymakers bring to their tasks.’ This surely suggests that we should not ignore the widespread and potent effects of positive illusions, especially the aspects most relevant to Vietnam, such as the evidence that in an implemental mindset, positive illusions may ‘especially blind people to risk.’

Like a ticking bomb, Vietnam was handled anxiously and indecisively by each of the U.S. presidents between 1946 and 1972, with voices simultaneously clamouring either to put it down and back off, or to do everything in their power to fight it. Fearing the consequences of both actions, neither was ever done; it was simply dumped onto each successor until it inevitably exploded in someone’s face. But it burnt everyone’s hands on its way, not to mention American credibility and prestige. A succession of administrations became obsessed with it, seeing nothing but the red menace of communism, and bleeding themselves white with a war policy heedless of signs of disaster. The result, for the U.S., was 59,000 killed, 303,000 injured, and a communist Vietnam as many had predicted was inevitable from the start. John Stoessinger concluded that ‘in no war did personalities play a greater role than in Vietnam. I believe that, in the course of a single generation, five American presidents based their policies in Indochina not on Asian realities but on their own fears and, ultimately, on their hopes.’ The fallacy was that the Vietnam War could be won by half-measures (i.e. without resorting to total war), a conviction that somehow all the presidents maintained. But that was, as was anticipated by many contemporaries, argued by many historians, and then proven by history, an illusion.

---

214 Richard Betts, personal communication.
217 Ibid., p. 146.
Chapter VIII

Vanity Dies Hard

Overconfidence in one’s own ability is the root of much evil. Vanity, egoism, is the deadliest of all characteristics. This vanity, combined with extreme ignorance of conditions … produces more shipwrecks and heartaches than any other part of our mental make-up.

Alice Foote MacDougall ¹

Appearances to the mind are of four kinds. Things either are what they appear to be; or they neither are, nor appear to be; or they are and do not appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be.

Epictetus ²

Positive illusions offer a solution to the empirical puzzle that states are often so belligerent towards each other that they go to war, at the expense of much blood and treasure, even when the odds are uncertain or against them. Since we know that positive illusions are widespread in human judgement, we should expect them in politics and international relations rather than not. In my four case studies, positive illusions were evident in both wars (the First World War and the Vietnam War), and also contributed to causing the two crises (the Munich Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis). In support of the theory, both crises appear to have subsequently been defused partly as a result of a reduction of positive illusions during the course of the crisis. By the end, there were few illusions. The distribution of positive illusions compared across the four case

---

studies suggests that regime type and openness of debate are crucial factors in whether positive illusions filter through to encourage war.

I suggest that the positive illusions phenomenon offers four contributions to theory on the causes of war: First, a novel cause of war initiation itself. Second, a mechanism to explain why, even when the underlying reason for war is rational, leaders are so willing to accept the risks and costs of fighting. Third, an origin for the underlying egoistic behaviour of states that is a fundamental but vague assumption of ‘realist’ theory in international relations. Fourth, an explanation for why, within the ‘neorealist’ and ‘rational choice’ theory frameworks, misperceptions tend to be in a positive direction and, as a result, why they cause war. Finally, despite their tendency to promote conflict, positive illusions may actually confer long-term security advantages even if – or even because – they incur costs, given that they serve to unite, fight and demonstrate resolve in a dangerous world where everyone else is over-confident too.

RESULTS OF THE CASE STUDIES

I argued that positive illusions were evident among both sides in World War I, and on the U.S. side during the Vietnam War (results are summarised in Table 8.1). Chamberlain’s positive illusions that he would be able to steal a peace with Germany exacerbated the Munich Crisis, as did Khrushchev’s positive illusions that the U.S. would permit Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba 90 miles from the Florida coast. However, although positive illusions did contribute to causing the two crises, they were absent at the end of them (and not coincidentally according to the theory, so was war). This supports the prediction that positive illusions are associated with conditions that can change to reduce them and avert war, and concurs with Richard Lebow’s finding that:

‘crisis may even prove essential to rapprochement in some instances, in that the shock of acute confrontation or defeat is required to dispel dangerous illusions ... When initiators recognized and corrected for initial misjudgements, they usually succeeded in averting war, although this often required a major cooperative effort, as in the Fashoda and Cuban missile crises. When little or no learning occurred ... the protagonists remained on a collision course.’

Positive illusions were not evident on every single side in all cases. However, this is not necessarily unexpected. Even if they were present in all cases, in some of them they may be outweighed or masked by numerous other factors. Furthermore, as explained in (Appendix 3.4), I deliberately selected tough case studies where positive illusions-type effects should have been limited, and where explanations arising from alternative theories already exist. Finding evidence of positive illusions in such circumstances means a significant success for the theory in passing a strong test. Hence, positive illusions appear to play an important role in provoking war, and ought not to be ignored.

---

Crucial to this study is the *distribution* of positive illusions among (and within) the cases – they tended to occur under specific circumstances and not others. This will be a central focus for my conclusions, as these differences present the opportunity to understand *why* and *when* positive illusions occur, and how they might be reduced.

**Comparing the Cases**

I predicted that positive illusions would be *most* likely to occur in non-democratic regimes where debate was closed – i.e. where over-confident beliefs among decision-makers would be least opposed. This was borne out in the case of the Central Powers in WW I, but unclear in the case of the North Vietnamese leadership. The high level of positive illusions predicted for Hitler in the Munich Crisis and Khrushchev in the Cuban Missile Crisis is supported by their initially ambitious aims that led to the crisis in the first place.

The U.S. in Vietnam was predicted to exhibit a medium level of positive illusions (given that debate was relatively closed, yet within a democracy). Positive illusions were certainly evident, but not overwhelming. They appear to help explain some of the remaining puzzles, but leaders were not hopelessly optimistic about any outright victory.

At the other extreme, positive illusions were predicted to have been *least* likely to occur in democratic regimes where debate was open. This was borne out in assessments of capabilities by the allies in the Munich Crisis, and by the U.S. in the Cuban Missile Crisis, but was violated by evidence of positive illusions in the Triple Entente in WW I (though their positive illusions were arguably not as strong as those in the Central Powers – which were coded at the opposite extreme). However, the fact that positive illusions were evident *even* in some of the least expected circumstances suggests that they may play a significant role even where contextual factors should conspire to restrain them.
Table 8.1. Summary of the main results, comparing predicted and evident positive illusions among all case studies. Grey indicates evidence of positive illusions, blank areas no or little evidence of positive illusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicted level of positive illusions</th>
<th>Debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wars</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WW I (Triple Entente)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam (US)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munich Crisis (Allies)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban Missile Crisis (US)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crises (at their end)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munich Crisis (Allies)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban Missile Crisis (US)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some potential over-confidence in the Tet Offensive.
** Some potential positive illusions about adversary’s intentions, but not about relative capabilities.
*** Some potential positive illusions about the effectiveness of the U.S. deterrence strategy
Do Positive Illusions Co-vary with War and Peace?

The above section showed that positive illusions varied according to the predicted levels of regime type and openness of debate. Here, the results of ‘type I congruence analysis’ show that high levels of positive illusions are correlated with high levels of war (see Table 8.1). Positive illusions were indeed associated with wars: while positive illusions were evident in both international crises that did break out in war, they were not evident by the end of the two crises that did not (and remained just ‘crises’). In addition, the degree of positive illusions approximately conformed to the levels predicted. Despite this general support for the positive illusions hypothesis, I investigate how and why certain aspects of the cases deviated from the predictions.

Positive Illusions in a Democracy: The U.S. in Vietnam

Although democratic, positive illusions were evident in U.S. policy towards Vietnam. From the point of view of my theory, this is not unexpected because U.S. decision-making in Vietnam was relatively closed, so a medium amount of any potential positive illusions were expected to get through the system. Nevertheless, apparently important positive illusions may be surprising in a democracy. How were they allowed to persist? There were certainly some unusual circumstances that aggravated optimistic beliefs: First, the release of the Pentagon Papers testified to the fact that the U.S. government had to some extent covered up the situation such that the public and media were unaware of the reality. Second, the U.S. leadership in part ended up pursuing over-ambitious strategies on the basis of unduly favourable military reports and because civilian officials screened contradictory information. Thus, although decision-making was made with good information being collected, optimism accumulated as the information was passed up the chain of command and was not subject to wider scrutiny.

North Vietnamese decision-making was difficult to assess because it was conducted in secret and left little documentary evidence. We can say, however, that although non-democratic and with a closed debate, North Vietnam appears not to have exhibited any particular over-optimism about winning. Ho Chi Minh was certainly full of faith in his ‘army,’ even expecting that ten of his own fighters would die for each one invader killed, but this was a reflection of deep-seated conviction, not over-optimism.4 The perseverance and continued willingness to fight simply reflected a widespread and renewable resolve which is characteristic of nationalist movements. The North’s most ambitious military undertaking, the Tet offensive of 1968, perhaps betrayed some elements of over-confidence, but decision-makers appeared to have been aware of the political gains that could be made despite any potential failure on the battlefield.

Lack of Positive Illusions in Non-Democracies with Closed Debate: The Munich and Cuba Crises

While positive illusions were predicted to be more likely in non-democratic regimes with closed decision-making, these conditions applied to Hitler but he did not always exhibit behaviour

---

consistent with positive illusions. His grandiose aims clearly led to the crisis in the first place, but any positive illusions he may have had about military capabilities were dispelled at the time of Munich. The case study highlighted how, at that point, Hitler frequently consulted his generals and advisors, and he did update his assessments on the basis of their advice. The effect of this on the decision-making process was to effectively oppose Hitler’s ambitious intentions and resulted in the prevention of war in 1938. Thus, it is possible that the German decision-making process during the Munich Crisis was actually quite open and succeeded in suppressing any over-optimism (the fact that significantly increased positive illusions coincided with war in 1939 further supports the hypothesis; I come back to this shortly).

Khrushchev, though in a non-democratic regime with a severely closed decision-making process, did not exhibit positive illusions towards the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although he appears to have been over-optimistic in expecting that the U.S. would tolerate Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba (thus causing the crisis), and in dragging out the crisis in the hope of greater U.S. concessions, the accidents and brinkmanship that intensified the very real risk of nuclear war quickly destroyed any positive illusions that he could expect the U.S. to capitulate.

**Do Positive Illusions co-vary with Changes in Peace and War?**

The above section showed that positive illusions correlate with instances of war and peace. Here, the results of ‘type II congruence analysis,’ show a within-case correlation between changes in positive illusions and changes in war. In other words, when the overall context is held constant by virtue of focusing on a single conflict between the same opponents, did war intensify when positive illusions increased? Such a comparison over time also reduces the possibility that a third factor is ultimately responsible for the link (since that third factor would have to vary in synchrony with both independent and dependent variables).

*Variation in U.S. Positive Illusions during the Vietnam War*

During the Vietnam War, U.S. escalations are arguably related to the apparent level of positive illusions (these are set out in Table 8.2). This is a fairly crude comparison of relative levels of each variable, but it seems to imply that, while many characteristics are held constant over several observations of the same war, escalations did co-vary with positive illusions. Positive illusions may be a particularly relevant phenomenon in Vietnam, given the empirical finding that positive illusions may significantly blind people to risk when trying to implement a task, and given the experimental correlation between the determination or obligation to implement a project, and the illusion of control that people experience.  

---

Table 8.2 Variation in relative levels of positive illusions and U.S. escalations in the Vietnam War. Relative levels are important because, for example, Kennedy committed only a small number of military personnel, but this represented a major increase in U.S. commitment to the war. The suggestion is that when decision-making was less open, positive illusions and its attendant manifestations of over-confidence increased, resulting in an intensification or escalation of the war. Hence, positive illusions are implicated as a correlate of war.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Positive Illusions?</th>
<th>Relative Escalation</th>
<th>Decision-making</th>
<th>Potential explanatory factors</th>
<th>Source of positive illusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truman</td>
<td>Not overt</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Unquestioned U.S. supremacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower</td>
<td>Not overt</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Unquestioned U.S. supremacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Less open</td>
<td>Political gains</td>
<td>U.S. supremacy, Inner-circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Political gains, if not victory</td>
<td>Inner-circle, military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Large (but different)*</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Honorable peace</td>
<td>Inner circle, himself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>Hint of</td>
<td>Proposed</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Political gains</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* More intensive bombing campaigns

Variation in Hitler’s Positive Illusions from 1938 to 1939

Although Hitler was neither leader of a democratic government nor hardly a model of unprejudiced decision-making, the debate about foreign policy was relatively open at the time of the Munich Crisis in 1938, but became increasingly closed thereafter, as argued in Chapter 5. This change co-varies with the avoidance of war in 1938 and the eventual expression of Hitler’s over-confidence and the outbreak of war in 1939. In the months before the crisis, Hitler’s insatiable ambitions were temporally restrained by strong advice not to initiate a war in 1938 – if they did, his advisors argued, they would lose. Hitler appeared to act on their advice. By the following year, however, he had begun to increasingly trust his own judgment over that of others, and he severely under-estimated the allies ranged against him. The gradual unbridling of Hitler’s enormous ambitions eventually exploded into one of the greatest examples of over-confidence of
all time. In the end, ‘the downfall of the Third Reich was due in no small measure to Adolf Hitler’s inability to realize that in strategic terms, the road to everywhere is the road to nowhere.’

WHEN ARE POSITIVE ILLUSIONS IMPORTANT?

Research on positive illusions implies that a majority of people are subject to its effects. But as with all psychological biases, there is a tendency for them to be expressed; it is not an inevitability for every person or at all times. In addition to individual variation, positive illusions are mediated by the context in which a decision is made. The two main contexts I compared in this study – democratic versus non-democratic governments, and open versus closed decision-making – were expressly predicted to alter the impact of positive illusions. I now exploit this variation to comment on how those contextual factors promote or reduce positive illusions.

Does Democracy Quash Positive Illusions?

Positive illusions are hypothesized to influence policy more easily in non-democratic than in democratic regimes. In the case studies, non-democracies certainly appeared to be especially prone to the persistence of biased opinions because of a lack of challenges from contrary information or from dissenters. The apparent effects of positive illusions on decisions could be greatly exacerbated by the lack of wider scrutiny (e.g. Hitler’s ambitions were unaffected by the unpopularity towards war in Germany), or reduced by domestic discontent (e.g. public opinion restrained the U.S. in Vietnam). As the Vietnam case also showed, however, even democracy does not ensure that information and assessment is effectively scrutinised or challenged. Moreover, the political in-fighting that is a hallmark of democracy can often lead to explicit failures in balanced decision-making, and this may be particularly true of the U.S. government:

‘The effect of the American Presidency with its power of appointment in the Executive branch is overbearing. Advisers find it hard to say no to the President or to dispute policy because they know that their status, their invitation to the next White House meeting, depends on staying in line. If they are Cabinet officers, they have in the American system no parliamentary seat to return to from which they may retain a voice in government.’

Despite imperfections, democracy is better at dispelling illusions that non-democracies. Sumit Ganguly argues that military over-optimism, though evident in the history of both India and Pakistan, was much reduced on the Indian side precisely because its more democratic institutions and public served to check unwarranted over-confidence. He further warns that the current trend away from democratic ideals is likely to permit false optimism to rise dangerously to the surface.

---

The hypothesis that unfounded positive illusions are more likely to be crushed in democracies may contribute to explaining the so-called ‘democratic peace;’ The phenomenon that democracies do not fight wars against each other. Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that, when they do fight (against states that are not democracies), democracies tend to win. This is thought to result from their more prudent assessment and electing to fight only enemies that they know they can defeat. Clearly, there are historical exceptions in which democracies took on enemies that they failed to defeat. Yet, as Victor Hanson observes, the overall effect of democracy can be beneficial even when foreign policy fails because of it:

‘Had America been as closed a society as was Vietnam, then it may well have won the battle but lost the war [that is, won the ‘Vietnam battle’ in the wider ‘super-power war’], much like the Soviet Union, which imploded after its involvement in Afghanistan – a military intervention similar to America’s in Vietnam in terms of tactical ineptitude, political denseness, and strategic imbecility, but a world apart in the Russian’s denial of free criticism, public debate, and uncensored reporting about their error. How odd that the institutions that can thwart the daily battle progress of Western arms can also ensure the ultimate triumph of its cause. If the Western commitment to self-critique in part caused American defeat in Vietnam, then that institution was also paramount in the explosion of Western global influence in the decades after the war.’

Does Open Debate Quash Positive Illusions?

Intelligence information itself is often well collected, the problem is how it is disseminated, debated and, ultimately, used. In my case studies, openness of debate played a significant role: the apparent effects of positive illusions on decisions could be greatly exacerbated by closure of debate and information suppression (e.g. the U.S. in Vietnam), or reduced by an intensive and expansive search for options and solutions (e.g. the U.S. in the Cuban Missile Crisis). In fact, openness of debate appeared to be more important than regime type – positive illusions seemed to vary more among styles of debate than they did among regimes. Indeed, positive illusions sometimes correlated with changing levels of openness within the same regime type.

Although Hitler’s foreign policy decision-making was much more open in 1938 than it was later, this changed significantly after the Munich Crisis, and impacted on the decision for war in 1939. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, an unprecedented U.S. team of advisers was assembled to evaluate options and debate the appropriate responses and, as we saw, any positive illusions were

---


apparently dispelled or prevented as a result of this process. By contrast, decision-making in Vietnam became particularly closed in the Johnson administration, and he became less and less exposed to alternative viewpoints. Some authors hold the view that, had he lived, Kennedy would not have escalated as Johnson did in 1965, largely because he would have ‘heeded advice suggesting that South Vietnam was not willing to save itself.’

In support of this argument, he had already proved able to resist optimistic predictions of a rapid victory regarding an earlier potential intervention in Laos, and he was suspicious of military advice after the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ultimately, Johnson’s more closed decision-making environment was a key factor in maintaining optimism. He believed that:

‘success in international crises was largely a matter of national guts; that the opponent would yield to superior force; that presidential control of force can be “suitable,” “selective,” “swift,” “effective,” and “responsive” to civilian authority; and that crisis management and execution are too dangerous and events move too rapidly for anything but the tightest secrecy.’

Paul Kowert argued that Johnson ‘suffered a great deal politically from pursuing policies endorsed by ideologically unified top advisors but not subjected to wider scrutiny.’ He also suffered from others closing the debate below him. In addition to Robert McNamara’s significant information suppression described in Chapter 7, in the last year of the Johnson administration Walt Rostow also steered negative information and dissenters away from White House. (In 1986, the U.S. Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act intended ‘to remove the reputed civilian filter represented by the secretary of defence and to prevent the suppression of dissenting opinions.’ While this may have helped, it is not thought to have solved the problem entirely – the selection and education of the military service chiefs and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman remains a ‘heavily politicised’ process).

During the Vietnam War, debate was somewhat constrained in congress too. U.S. Senators were to some extent bound to continuation and escalation because not supporting prevailing policy meant a politically untenable lack of support for American soldiers fighting overseas and, in addition, an implicit admission of American failure. In other words, they always faced the spectre of being branded as not supporting national security. Defence contractors also had an important influence (there were 300 lobbyists funded by the Pentagon on Capitol Hill), and the military wooed Senators’ support with a series of VIP events (at that time 25% of Congress members were reserve army officers). Beyond these factors, there were their political

18 Ibid., p. 16.
careers to consider. When new members of the 89th Congress convened in 1965, the house leader Vice-President Hubert Humphrey told them "If you feel an urge to stand up and make a speech attacking Vietnamese policy, don’t make it." He didn’t mean this to cover for governmental mistakes, but rather as professional advice if they should want to get re-elected in the subsequent election.

To summarise this section, the case studies made clear that information itself is only a single part of the necessary process towards achieving good decisions. Much more crucial is the openness of debate – the degree to which leaders and institutions encourage diverse and non-partisan opinions, consider multiple options, exploit intelligence analysis, stimulate further intelligence gathering, cooperate with intelligence services, and heed advice. If they do not, positive illusions will thrive and persist. To end with final striking example, John Garofano argues that the Israeli leadership suffered from a decreased openmess towards both civilian and military advice before the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Then Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon and his advisers ‘over-estimated the time available and under-estimated the cost in lives to achieve their goals.’

Michael Handel expands on the reasons for this:

‘[Prime Minister Menahem] Begin and Sharon knew what they wanted to do, chose to isolate themselves from their intelligence advisors, and never evinced the slightest doubt that they could achieve their objective just because they wished it ... The Israeli Defence Forces became bogged down in a Vietnam-style war that could not be won ... Even more tragic is the fact that “there was nothing at fault with the intelligence analysis and evaluation on Lebanon. The necessary data were all there, the recommendations proved to be sober and realistic.” The advice of even the best intelligence organisation in the world is useless when a nation’s key decision-makers are permitted to ignore critical information and indulge wishful thinking unrestrained by legal, political or moral checks and balances.’

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

Although the focus of the thesis has been positive illusions in war, they are likely to affect international relations generally. Given that much of international politics is more about diplomacy, alliances, negotiation, manipulation, and credible threats than it is about war, positive illusions may have a significant impact – both good and bad – on these more everyday aspects of international relations. In some cases they may enhance commitment and strengths, which could increase bargaining power, allies and ultimately the national interest. At other times, they may raise expectations and perceived power and influence which could undermine otherwise advantageous cooperation and agreements. There are also more sinister questions about how positive illusions of moral and ideological supremacy might affect the practice or violation of the

20 Ibid., p. 334.
laws of war (and Just War Theory), as well as ethical precedents in inter-state intervention – whether for selfish or humanitarian goals. These are implications wide open for future scrutiny, but I briefly consider a few below.

**The Gamble of War and Prospect Theory**

One could argue that decision-makers do not choose war because they are over-confident about their chances of victory, but rather because they are simply willing to take the gamble. War is, after all, an inherently unpredictable event and according to Clausewitz, ‘no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance.’\(^{23}\) However, that begs the question: What factors lead people to take such risks in the first place? If anything, going to war aware that the outcome is uncertain is harder to understand than going to war with an erroneous belief in victory. Therefore, even if positive illusions do not promote an unrealistic expectation of victory, they may nevertheless contribute to the decision that it is worth the risk to fight. In fact, positive illusions may lead to perceptions that make the gamble of war attractive even if victory seems quite unlikely. For example, they may lead to an under-estimation of the costs, an exaggeration of the capacity to control events if things go badly, or an unrealistic optimism that things might turn out well after all. So even where it may be evident that a leader just plumped for putting up a fight or hoped for a lucky victory, positive illusions may help to explain why. As Clausewitz noted:

‘If Frederick the Great, in the year 1756, saw that war was inevitable, and that he could only escape destruction by being beforehand with his enemies, it became necessary for him to commence the war himself, but at the same time it was certainly very bold: for few men in his position would have made up their minds to do so.’\(^{24}\)

As an example from this thesis, in the Vietnam case I argued that the weight of evidence about military, political and social prospects should have advised against involvement. But how much of a risk was it to fight? During the war U.S. analysts ‘consistently foresaw the achievement of military objectives as no more than a fifty-fifty proposition.’\(^{25}\) In such a case, it remains to be understood what it is about the leaders that led them to believe that this risky gamble was worth taking (if it was really 50-50, they effectively gambled blood and treasure against an equivocal foreign policy objective on the flip of a coin). Could not positive illusions help to explain why decision-makers were willing to accept these risks and costs, over and above all the political constraints?

Many authors have suggested that Prospect Theory – the empirical phenomenon that people become risk prone when faced only with choices that are costly – explains many risky decisions made in international conflict (such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and Japan’s decision

---


for war in 1941). However, while Prospect Theory might indeed fit observed state behaviour, it does not explain why people become risk-acceptant in the so-called ‘domain of losses.’ In other words, the origin of the motivation to take such risks in the face of adversity has not been specified. The positive illusions hypothesis offers a potential origin.

Deterrence

Positive illusions may have relevance to deterrence theory as well. Even in the post Cold War world, deterrence of both conventional and nuclear war, as well as containment of rogue states, remains a significant foreign policy challenge. Understanding psychological biases is crucial to developing good deterrence strategies, and positive illusions appear to be particularly important. I have already discussed how Khrushchev’s positive illusions in installing nuclear missiles in Cuba effectively undermined the U.S. deterrence strategy of the time (see Chapter 6). This may be a much wider problem because positive illusions on either side will make deterrence much harder than expected:

‘Given the overwhelming destruction which both sides would expect such a war [as a Third World War] to bring, it seems hard to see how such a conflict could erupt in the absence of misperception. It would be particularly dangerous if either the United States or the Soviet Union [or China today] or both believed that that war was inevitable and that striking first was significantly preferable to allowing the other side to strike first. Since a number of psychological processes could lead people to over-estimate these factors, it is particularly important for statesmen to realise the ways in which common perceptual processes can lead to conclusions that are not only incorrect, but also extremely dangerous.’

Positive Illusions and Realism

In addition to an awareness of positive illusions improving an understanding of the causes of war, it also has a more general role in understanding international relations. ‘Realists’ posit that all nations are in a ‘state of nature,’ vying with each other to achieve egoistic goals and to maintain their relative power, and that this drives the competitive nature of international relations. However, the origin of this egoistic behaviour, though an essential assumption of realist theory, has not been satisfactorily identified:

‘Traditional realist arguments rest principally on one of two discrete ultimate causes, or intellectual foundations. The first is Reinhold Niebuhr’s argument that humans are evil. The second is grounded in the work of Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau: Humans possess an innate *animus dominandi*, or drive to dominate. Both intellectual foundations are widely considered to be weak, however, because they rely either on a theological force or a metaphysical precept to explain state behaviour.’

As a result of these unsatisfactory origins, most international relations scholars turned away from classical realism to ‘neorealism,’ a theory which purports to explain the same observation of competitive state behaviour but attributes it instead to the pressures of the so-called ‘anarchic international system’ (in which each state must arm to ensure their own security given the lack of a higher authority to police them). I argued in Chapter 2 that positive illusions add usefully to the neorealist framework by accounting for war-causing misperceptions. However, there has been a recent revival of classical realism, to which positive illusions may offer a novel keystone. Vincent Falger argues that classical realism was rejected for the wrong reasons – Hans Morgenthau’s assumptions about a human ‘lust’ for power may be wrong, but the resulting theory need not be. Recent research has advanced Social Identity Theory (SIT; see Chapter 2) as a potential basis for explaining the assumption of states’ egoistic ‘self-help’ behaviour. Jonathan Mercer suggested that SIT provides an origin for the egoistic behaviour of states within the classical realism framework, thus offering the theory a plausible driving mechanism that has, until now, been lacking. However, Mercer does not go far enough either, because there is another nebulous assumption *within* the logic of Social Identity Theory itself: ‘To explain the extreme and ethnocentric nature of minimal-group competition, SIT posits a universal desire for self-esteem.’ This is problematic because, while SIT has an enormous following, broad and replicated empirical support, and appears the most parsimonious theory to account for empirical data, the foundational ‘universal desire for self-esteem’ remains an assumption. The adaptive advantages of positive illusions (described in Chapter 2) may fill this gap, providing an evolutionary mechanism to explain why humans evolved such a fundamental psychological trait in the first place. These proposed links between the complementary theories of positive illusions, Social Identity Theory, and realism are presented in Figure 8.1.

34 Ibid., p. 242.
**Figure 8.1** Positive illusions as a potential link underlying Social Identity Theory (SIT) and realism. Positive illusions offer a mechanism driving SIT, while SIT offers a mechanism driving classical realism – the egoistic self-help behavior of states in the international system.

- **Natural selection for positive self-image** (Positive Illusions)
  - Previous assumption in SIT theory

- **Desire for positive self-image** (Social Identity Theory, SIT)

- **In-group out-group bias favours own group, hostile to others** (SIT Theory’s ‘Minimal Group Paradigm’)
  - Previous assumption in Realism

- **Egoistic behavior among states in the international system** (Realism)
EXTREMES OF POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

Figure 3.2 illustrated how positive illusions vary among people. In the following sections I outline some key factors responsible for this variation, including depression (where there are hardly any positive illusions at all), gender differences, cultural variation, selection effects on leaders, and ego (where one finds the greatest positive illusions of all).

Depression

Research shows that positive illusions are an essential element of the mentally healthy mind. By contrast, positive illusions are greatly reduced or absent among people who are depressed. Indeed, this phenomenon has a name: ‘depressive realism.’ Not only do depressed people have lower positive illusions, but in addition, ‘depression is one of the few forms of mental illness associated with lower levels of aggression and violence.’ If positive illusions have an impact on international relations, then we should also predict incidences of depression among decision-makers to impact on international relations.

This might seem an unlikely scenario, but depression can be triggered by numerous events common to people in their 60s and 70s – typical ages for national leaders. One of the main causes is during or following illness. Herbert Abrams, who studies the physical and mental health of U.S. presidents, has warned of the consequences: ‘Depression, so common an effect of illness, is associated with self-doubt and avoidance of decisions or acceptance of responsibility. When depressed individuals can be induced to make decisions, their capabilities are reduced. They have impaired attention, concentration, and memory. Their powers of analysis fail, and they may over-emphasize negative information.’ While this suggests a number of associated problems, one predicted effect is an absence of positive illusions.

Depression commonly follows heart attacks (and for half of patients, persists up to 4 months afterwards), the mere diagnosis of heart disease, strokes (after which depression can remain severe for 6-24 months), trauma, surgery (which, for those over 65, engenders a 50% incidence of ‘disabling post-operative depression’), cancer (in which depression is the ‘most common emotional complication’), hypertension, and taking some prescribed drugs. Depression following these conditions is likely to be quite prevalent in recent history. Many of the 17 U.S. presidents in the 20th century suffered one or more of the above (McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Reagan).

---

39 Ibid. ‘Other drugs have the opposite effect; anaesthetics, for example, can ‘reduce inhibitions, or encourage over-confidence,’ see p. 140.
The potentially common incidence of depression among leaders lays the foundations for future tests to assess whether decisions can be attributed in part to associated variation in positive illusions. Are policy choices and decision-making more pacific during bouts of depression? I offer here one speculative example that suggests avenues for further scrutiny.

Depression may have been important in the two leaders that, each in their own way, inherited the U.S. defeat in Vietnam: Johnson and Nixon. Johnson’s personal goal of founding his cherished ‘Great Society’ was blown out of the water by the costs of the war, and he was burdened with the deaths of tens of thousands of young U.S. draftees (his press secretary wrote that ‘the dead were coming back in such numbers that LBJ began to grow morose, and sometimes took to bed with the covers pulled above his eyes, as if he could avoid the ghosts of young men marching around in his head’). Did depression contribute to his decision to withdraw from the re-election campaign? Nixon came to the war with high hopes to end it successfully, but with all the frustrations and complications of extricating the U.S. from an increasingly unpopular war. It seems that he became quite seriously depressed, at least following Watergate. Indeed, Kissinger and Schlesinger took the unusual step of (illegally) demanding that the Joint Chiefs of Staff consult them directly before carrying out any presidential order. When one considers the predicted low levels of positive illusions in the face of personal failure and depression, this could partly account for these two leaders’ fall from grace. In particular, both were faced with the problem of controlling hugely complex events and, as Daniel Nettle noted, ‘the illusion of control disappears amongst the depressed or dysphoric. The [reduced] strength of illusion of control in a person is predictive of their negative mood following task failure, their ease of discouragement in the face of new challenges, and their depressive symptoms in response to life events.’

Abrams concluded that when a president is ill, ‘in both the national and the leader’s interest, he should be separated from the burden of decision making in crisis.’ I agree, but one wonders whether in some respects decisions under such circumstances might benefit from an absence of over-confidence – which may bode well for peace, if sometimes badly for the vigour and self-assurance that fortifies national security.

Gender

While positive illusions are common to both genders, men tend to have greater positive illusions than women do. If there is some ‘optimal’ margin of illusion, then men tend to stray towards the high side and women to the low side, reinforcing what Roy Baumeister described as the ‘familiar views of the male ego, male overconfidence, and male tendencies toward escapist patterns (more alcohol and drug abuse, etc.), as well as the greater prevalence of depression, insecurity, and lack

of confidence among traditional women. These differences may stem from natural levels of male and female hormones. As Richard Wrangham has described in detail, positive illusions seem to be closely linked to testosterone. Although both males and females have and react to testosterone in the same way, men not only have much higher baseline levels, but ‘men’s testes give them the capacity for a quicker rise in testosterone than women can experience. So women should be less vulnerable to the emotional allure of being drawn into fights based on temporary steroid-induced illusions about their own abilities.’ Wrangham suggests that this is one reason why there are so many men in politics in the first place – status and power reward them with a regular rush to their evolutionary sensitivities (the potential link between testosterone and positive illusions is outlined in Appendix 8.1).

If positive illusions have an impact on international relations, therefore, then we might also predict an impact of gender on international relations. Before ploughing into this controversial area, it is important to point out that the comparatively few female leaders in history have often been as confident and aggressive as many of their male counterparts – e.g. Bodicea, Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir. However, there may be a selection process by which only the most aggressive women survive in what is still a highly male dominated profession. As Robert Jervis notes, ‘the kind of women who would be selected as leaders in a world of sexual equality could be very different from those who now come to the fore.’ When Elizabeth Dole decided not to run for the presidency in 2000, Shirley Chisholm (who ran in 1972), remarked that ‘when you make a bid for such a high office, you have to have energy. You have to be very outspoken and assertive, and not be afraid to offend people. She doesn’t have the temperament. She’s too cautious.’

But what would women do differently if they obtained power? Eleanor Clift and Tom Brazaitis have made a fascinating study of women ‘blazing the leadership trail’ in U.S. politics, and the obstacles and perceptions that oppose them. One prevalent opinion of what sort of aims women might possess was espoused by the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator Ted Stevens (a Republican from Alaska): He moaned in 1999 that ‘women don’t support military spending … [and] constantly ask him, “Why do you want to spend more money on the military? Don’t they have enough?”’ There is little evidence for any gender difference. Jeannette Rankin, the House Representative for Montana, voted against U.S. involvement in both World War I (following the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare against ships in the Atlantic) and World War II (following Pearl Harbour; the only ‘no’ vote in the house). Female suffragists actually tried to induce her to support war to avoid women becoming cast as hopelessly pacifistic (Rankin rejected their pleas). By contrast, Margaret Chase Smith, the first

48 Ibid., p. xi.
woman to serve in both the House and the Senate and who once made a bid for the presidency, ‘focused on defence issues and had a reputation for being one of the most hawkish members of Congress during the cold war.’

In 2001, a record number of women were planning to run for Congress. But 9-11 drastically altered the salient issues and overshadowed agendas with which women candidates were proving successful. Many dropped out or lost support. ‘Women had to face the hard reality that voters may not trust them to lead the country in a time of war.’ Results of surveys show that women are perceived by the public to be ‘less capable on foreign policy, law-and-order issues, and the economy. And they score significantly lower on the ability to lead during a crisis and the ability to make difficult decisions.’ As a result, political analysts are reported to expect that the first female president will have ‘the body of a woman with the character traits of a man. More than likely she will come from the moderate-to-conservative segment of the ideological spectrum.’

If women are typically more peace loving than men, then for the time being it appears that untypical women are more likely to reach positions of power in the U.S. (and, for similar reasons, in many other countries). This is likely to be driven both by voter preferences (‘voters want the American version of Margaret Thatcher, a woman who won’t go wobbly in a crisis’) and by selection effects (women who might go wobbly in a crisis are less likely to be those that desire or want to run for election, as among men). If anything, we might expect the opposite of the stereotype: For fear of being cast as liberal, ‘women frequently go too far in proving their toughness. Seeking credibility, they cater to men’s issues – military defense and the economy.’

A study by the National Women’s Political Caucus showed that women tend to win elections as often as men – when, that is, they actually run for them. The problem is the very small number that are in the electable pool. There aren’t that many female generals, governors or oil tycoons for the traditional process to draw on (evidence shows that raising campaign money is also more difficult for women). To put it simply, fewer women choose to run. At the beginning of this new century, there are 13 women senators (out of 100), and 62 representatives in the house (out of 435). If the current rate of increase continues, we have another 250 years before women are equally represented.

Political scientist Rose McDermott has conducted war games between different gender pairs: male-male, male-female, and female-female (each opponents’ sex was unknown to the other). Female-female dyads were far more cooperative, ending up at war much less often than male-male dyads, and obtaining higher overall payoffs as a result. In mixed gender dyads, however, women were more cooperative initially, but reacted similarly to men, often launching war in response to aggression. Significantly, women estimated their chances of winning as lower than did the men.

---

49 Ibid., p. xxii.
50 Ibid., p. ix.
51 Ibid., p. xvii
52 Ibid., p. xi.
53 Ibid., p. xiv.
54 Ibid., p. xii.

183
Gender differences could mean that international relations are especially exposed to the
effects and consequences of positive illusions – since it is predominantly men in positions of
power. Clearly, there are more important factors in international politics that override any
subtleties of gender, but the reality is that the average man experiences biological influences on
behaviour – including perhaps testosterone induced positive illusions – in a way that a woman
does not: For better or for worse.

Culture

Positive illusions are a universal human trait, present in all cultures. However, the degree to
which different cultures exhibit positive illusions varies. In general, Asian cultures are less self-
enhancing and more self-deprecating than western cultures. For example, in experiments
specifically designed to compare positive illusions, Canadians showed significantly more
unrealistic optimism than Japanese subjects. Another study, controlling for nationality,
compared Asian Americans with Caucasian Americans and found that, although they exhibited
similar optimism, Asian Americans tended to be more negative when probed on pessimistic
issues. The view of self in eastern cultures appears to include an element of the collective
groups to which people belong. However, when the group is the target of study rather than the
individual, Asians still evaluate their groups less positively than North Americans.

These cultural differences are important because they support the idea that positive
illusions are not ‘fixed traits’ that would fail to explain the variation in international politics.
Instead, they suggest that while positive illusions may constitute an inherent base-line tendency
in our psychology, they are malleable and can be socialized to trigger differently. Thus, culture is
likely to influence the expression of positive illusions, even if there is an underlying biological
mechanism common to everyone.

Differences in positive illusions are thought to arise from different pressures in the
respective cultural environments: ‘American situations are relatively conducive to self-
enhancement and American people are relatively likely to engage in self-enhancement …
Japanese situations are relatively conducive to self-criticism and Japanese people are relatively
likely to engage in self-criticism.’ Self-enhancement is more acceptable and more advantageous

---

Social Psychology 84: 60-79.
Enhancement in the United States and Self-Criticism in Japan’ Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 72:
1245-1267.
the Self: Self-Enhancement in the United States and Self-Criticism in Japan’ 1245-1267, p. 1245. These authors
suggest that ‘people in any given cultural context gradually develop through socialization a set of cognitive,
in the west, and many authors have suggested that optimism is particularly exaggerated in the U.S., rooted in the ideological culture of capitalism, materialism, and individualism. Indeed, according to psychologists David Armor and Shelley Taylor, ‘Americans are widely regarded as the most optimistic people on earth.’

Leaders

A crucial point that is often ignored in applications of psychological theory to politics is that decision-makers, whether in democracies or elsewhere, are not typical people. It is conceivable that, perhaps, their experience and sagacity may make them less prone to decision-making biases than the average subject in psychological experiments (for example, they might be more used to judging complex choices than other people). However, there is no evidence for this, so one might start out as other authors do with the benchmark assumption that leaders are subject to the same biases as everyone else. But in fact, in the case of optimism, I will argue that leaders are, if anything, particularly likely to be the kind of people that exhibit high levels. There are many reasons to expect that positive illusions might be particularly exacerbated among those who wield most power (see Figure 3.2).

Recall what positive illusions comprise – exaggerated self-perceptions, illusions of control over events, and overly optimistic expectations about the future. Now consider the careers of leading politicians. The people who make it to the top of political hierarchies will tend to be those who have high self-esteem, confidence in their capabilities to change things, and optimism that they can make a difference. To get to such a position, they necessarily require a strong character that can shoulder major burdens, accept numerous setbacks, face constant criticism, and yet still get up every day believing they are right and press on regardless. Few people attain power without the self-confidence to travel the long, strenuous and unsympathetic road to get there.

Richard Shenkman’s book, ‘Presidential Ambition: Gaining Power at Any Cost,’ argues that singular ambition is a defining characteristic of all U.S. presidents from the founding fathers to the present day. Throughout the history of the U.S., the intense competition to attain power meant that ‘in the struggle to win only the most ambitious survived.’ He concluded with the observation that ‘we like to pretend that normal people should be elected president. People, that

---

emotional, and motivational processes that enable them to function well – naturally, flexibly, and adaptively – in the types of situations that are fairly common and recurrent in the cultural context.’

is, with a normal amount of ambition. But normal people don’t have what it takes – that extraordinary drive to succeed.⁶⁶

Alan Ehrenhalt also notes the significant selection effect for ambitious personalities – a process that is widespread across government, and becoming stronger. ‘The 1990s find American government increasingly dominated by a modern class of professional politicians, people who work full-time at getting and holding office. In many cases, they have done little else in their entire adult lives.’⁶⁷ The result is that those in office, not just in the White House but across the government, ‘comprise a careerist elite whose lifetime political preoccupation has separated them from most people.’⁶⁸ The length, scale and rigours of the presidential election ‘is merely a grotesque exaggeration of the job that confronts ambitious politicians at all levels of the system.’⁶⁹ Ehrenhalt labels the effect of this phenomenon ‘self-nomination.’ Presidential candidates essentially nominate themselves via their unusual willingness to make the enormous efforts and sacrifices required to even seek office. ‘The aspiring candidate no longer needs to worry much about what important people think of him. He needs to worry about whether he has the stamina and desire to make it through the gruelling work that lies ahead. These changes in American politics do not entirely explain why we get the presidents we do, but they explain why we get the fields of presidential candidates we do.’⁷⁰ Voters have to choose from among this subset of ambitious personalities. ‘For most of these people, politics is all they have ever done in life, and all they have ever really wanted to do. Something about a political career has been irresistible to them from the beginning: the hand-shaking and the back-slapping, the camaraderie of a campaign headquarters, the self-validation of winning, the intrigues of a committee room.’⁷¹

Selection effects are likely to be prevalent in both democratic and non-democratic regimes. The party political process in democracies is well disposed to weed out unconfident types. Successful politicians who rise to positions of power tend to be those who are confident orators and debaters, who are more ruthless in their ambition than others, and more steadfast in their ability to be assailed with daily criticism and still believe their own position is the correct one.⁷² In non-democratic regimes, one may imagine that leaders will tend to be represented by even more confident personalities still. It is commonly the ruthless and battle-hardened who sweep others out of their way to attain power. Would we expect these people to be anything other than more ambitious and confident than the average? Clausewitz suggests such selection effects apply to military leaders as well: ‘It is impossible to imagine a distinguished general without boldness, that is to say, that no man can become one who is not born with this power of the soul, and we therefore look upon it as the first requisite for such a career.’⁷³

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 338.
⁶⁸ Ibid., p. xx.
⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 254.
⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 256.
⁷¹ Ibid., p. xxi.
⁷² I expect this may be particularly heightened in the adversarial system of British politics, in which quick and confident rebuttals are key skills in parliament. In the U.S. this is less of a problem, since presidents rarely have to field unscripted debates or appear before congress.
Once in power, a number of reinforcing effects may kick in. Barbara Tuchman wrote of J.F. Kennedy’s team of the so-called ‘Best and the Brightest,’ that ‘power and status exhilarated these men and their fellows; they enjoyed the urgencies, even the exhaustion, of government.’ Their successes, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, led them to believe ever more in their capacity to accomplish great things. Obviously, this can sometimes be justified, but there is also the danger that it leads to over-confidence. Roy Baumeister noted that ‘as people become more powerful, they may tend to hear increasing doses of flattery and agreement, which may impel them toward ever more favourable views of themselves.’

The old adage that ‘power corrupts’ and leads to an increasing sense of omnipotence and invulnerability has numerous historical precedents.

Although there will of course be exceptions, a combination of these various selection processes, combined with the trappings of power, may lead to an over-representation of particularly confident people in the higher echelons of government.

**Ego**

Although normal people experience positive illusions, they can be particularly exacerbated in people with certain personality *types* or certain personality *disorders*. Positive illusions have been shown to be positively correlated with levels of ego, self-esteem, and narcissism among normal people. In one study, people with high self-esteem were even ‘especially prone to persist at impossible tasks.’ In an extensive review of the literature on aggression, psychologist Roy Baumeister argues that both individual and collective violence can often be attributed to the convergence of two conditions. The first condition is a high ego. The second condition is a threat to this high ego. ‘Threatened egotism specifically elicits aggressive impulses directed toward the source of the threat.’ Positive illusions endanger us to this state of affairs because ‘people who overestimate themselves will be constantly at high risk of receiving evaluations that they are not as good as they think (because, in fact, they are not).’ Obviously, the higher the self-esteem, the more of a problem this will be. A number of studies show that those with ‘inflated self-opinions may be prone to violent or aggressive behaviour.’ Bizarrely, high self-esteem individuals often respond to failure by actually raising their predictions for future performance – a recipe for

---

74 Tuchman, B. (1984) *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 286. Another interesting feature is that following major conflicts, it is only the survivors that are left to form the political elite. Post-World War II administrations, especially in the United States, were full of combat veterans who had fought on the winning side, and who had necessarily survived without serious injury. They were perhaps, more than others at least, likely to see war as a workable – if undesirable – method of policy.


79 Ibid., p. 119.
disaster. Other studies show high self-esteem individuals tend to make excessive and self-defeating commitments. Alcohol is an additional factor that leads to inflated self-appraisals, overrating oneself, heightened self-esteem and, at the same time, hostile and violent behaviour. Indeed, most violent crimes are committed following alcohol abuse. In general, ‘people who hold high opinions of themselves tend to react irrationally, impulsively and emotionally when someone else presents a serious challenge to those favourable views. Such reactions may often lead to violence and aggression.’

This danger is especially exacerbated among people with psychological disorders. Narcissists (who experience grandiosity, exhibitionism, and greatly exaggerated opinions of themselves) and psychopaths (who experience grossly inflated images of their self-importance) are likely to have excessive positive illusions and harmful reactions when they are challenged. Psychopaths are associated with unusual levels of aggression. One study estimated that although they make up less than 1% of the population, psychopaths are responsible for more than 50% of crimes. Finally, Shelley Taylor sets out the evidence that people suffering from mania (the highs in the cycles of manic-depression) have especially exacerbated positive illusions which, though sometimes fostering remarkable feats of creativity, can also lead to damaging and dysfunctional behaviour.

Ego threats cannot be transplanted easily from the individual level to the workings of governments. Yet, state leaderships and institutions do seem to be subject to egoistic behaviour. This is no surprise in many tyrannies such as those of Stalin or Hitler, but in fact, even normal states tend to behave as if their ego is at stake. So much so, in fact, that egoistic status competition among states plays a key role in international relations theory (and a fundamental assumption in some branches of it). When there is a perception of slipping down in the hierarchy of status, violence and war are much more likely. Empirical data show that nations that see their status as not properly recognised have an increased probably of initiating wars to maintain it (similar effects have also been found in ethnic violence). For example, William Wohlforth argues that threats to Britain's status led to the Crimean and Suez wars of 1854-56 and 1956, and that the Cold War was principally played as a game of status between the U.S. and USSR.

There certainly appear to be strong links between positive illusions and violence, not only among individuals, but also among groups and nations. As Baumeister concluded, ‘modesty and humility deserve to be tried as antidotes to violence.’

---

80 Ibid., p. 115.
81 Ibid.
CONCLUSIONS

It is well established that deeply ingrained psychological biases affect human decision-making, and sometimes the chance of war is increased as a result. Positive illusions are not just ‘yet another’ bias, however. The hypothesis presented in this thesis builds on a significant convergence of three research findings: First, positive illusions in conflict are argued to be evolutionarily adaptive. Second, positive illusions are an integral aspect of our psychology. Third, positive illusions or ‘false optimism’ is a widely cited explanation for the war puzzle. Moreover, while many other psychological biases reported in laboratory experiments have been ‘applied’ as explanations for political phenomena, their origin is often not understood. The positive illusions hypothesis benefits from an explicit theory for why they were adaptive in human evolution, why they vary today, and why they are specifically linked to conflict. This makes positive illusions an unusually tangible, parsimonious and testable theory.

Because conflict has been a common and frequent feature throughout our history and pre-history, positive illusions may have served an adaptive advantage in maximising long-term combat performance in our evolutionary past. Positive illusions are bad because they result in more war. But if they serve to better fight, deter or defend against one’s enemies, then positive illusions in our military and political decision-makers could be argued to still serve national security interests, even if the result is increased levels of violence. In a world where there is more war (for whatever reason), positive illusions may help us survive it. Here is how Richard Wrangham puts it in his latest thinking:

‘The individual who feels anger, lust for revenge, high libido or a need to protect an infant can’t know that his or her behaviour will pay off. Often it won’t. But on average it has done so in the past, and we are left today with emotions that are irrational, albeit effective. So why has the history of mankind not taught “caution to the daring, and moderation to the proud?” The problem, I conclude, is that positive illusions help us too much. As long as it pays to be a high-rank man or an alpha nation, irrational assessments will be favoured because they promote victory.’

I argued earlier that soldiers and statesmen might benefit from positive illusions, but not necessarily the more bureaucratic roles in between these extremes. So my theme has been that positive illusions bring moments of glory in a world of increasing havoc. Certain combat roles likely still benefit from very high levels of confidence, so we might wish to encourage positive

---

illusions in them, even if it seems misplaced in other social settings. Antony Beevor noted recently that ‘one might well argue that the day that the British soldier becomes a model of caring citizenship is the day that he can no longer be counted on to hold the pass against the thug and tyrant.’\textsuperscript{90} Certain other roles may benefit from positive illusions. Benjamin Lambeth argued that:

‘the winning fighter pilot and the winning SSN [submarine] commander are, at bottom, winning personality types. The airplane and submarine are only extensions of their competitive instinct and prowess … It is that added factor derivative of attitude and will which largely accounts for the difference between mediocrity and mastery. Likewise in undersea warfare, tactical cunning and boldness in execution will frequently be the deciding factors in determining an engagement’s outcome.’\textsuperscript{91}

Aerial and undersea warfare are not ‘forgiving places for the indecisive,’ and according to a former Israeli Air Force chief of training, ‘the three most important ingredients in air-to-air combat are aggressiveness, aggressiveness, and aggressiveness.’\textsuperscript{92} The World War I ace Baron von Richthofen described the key trait as ‘the spirit of attack born in a brave heart.’ Fighter pilots tend to be screened for ‘emotional maturity, calmness under pressure, the ability to absorb information quickly, controlled self-confidence, adaptability under stress, and a deeply rooted will to win.’ Only then is it ascertained whether they can fly a plane or not. ‘Their personalities and situation assessments figure centrally in the course and outcome of the fights they win or lose.’\textsuperscript{93} Lambeth argues that the same logic applies to submarine warfare. Modern attack submarines are often nuclear powered, so commanders tend to come up through the ranks as engineers to deal with all the associated technical complexity, but when it comes to a fight, ‘what you really want in a submarine commander is a pirate.’

While exaggerated confidence may have been adaptive in our evolutionary past and sometimes yield glorious victories still, it is increasingly likely to wreak particular havoc in modern war. Positive illusions did not evolve to be adaptive within the increased scale and complexity of modern war. Today’s command, control and communications operate far from the battlefield, so psychological mechanisms are less likely to be updated by environmental and behavioural cues in the way that evolution set them up to do. Positive illusions can run riot without the feedback stimuli that would normally hold them in check. This creates a double-whammy effect – correctional stimuli are not only different to those in our evolutionary past, but they are rarely even experienced by decision-makers. The detachment and bureaucracy of modern war and military organizations means that even considerable havoc can be misconstrued as bad luck, poor communication or someone else’s fault, before enough negative information eventually filters back to correct initial over-confidence. There are many reasons to believe that positive illusions, like other legacies of our evolution, have long ago become embedded within

\textsuperscript{90} Antony Beevor, ‘Warfare May Have Changed but its Outcome is Always Unknown,’ The Times, 29 March 2003.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p. 40.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., p.42.
our institutions and society, often without the means to detect that they exist nor the incentives to correct them.

While we may not recognise it, we tend to evaluate ourselves too highly, we overplay our control over events, and we are overly optimistic about the future. Such effects are often exacerbated within groups, organizations and societies at large – entire nations and economies can become wrapped up in a bubble of positive illusions. In war, all these things may help us unite and fight, and that may be the reason that evolution has left us scarred with a bias towards optimism. But while our positive illusions may lend us numerous advantages in times of war, they also mean we end up there more often.

As Daniel Goleman suggested, ‘these very self-deceptions, which serve the individual so well, can themselves become threats to the survival of the collective.’ Whether it is war or environmental disaster, they lead us to take great risks:

‘given the dangers from the nuclear threat or other catastrophic weapons on the one hand, or those from the ecological crisis on the other, our positive illusions can become a pathological response. The illusion of unfounded optimism can lead to the conviction that everything will turn out all right for the planet, or that nothing much is really wrong, and so there is nothing one need do to try to change things.’

However, I am optimistic for the future. There are historical beacons of decision-making that shine through the fog of illusions. At the time the world came closest to nuclear war in 1962, we came closest to solving the problem. But vanity dies hard, and we quickly forget the lessons of the past. According to Richard Lebow, a key factor that facilitated the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis was the ‘personal relationship’ between Kennedy and Khrushchev that developed during the crisis. Lebow contends that, ‘by its end, they had become as much allies as adversaries, struggling against their own hawks and the mounting pressures pushing them toward a military showdown. It is no exaggeration to say that through the mechanism of a public-private deal, they went so far as to conspire with each other against their respective internal opponents.’

This bizarre alliance was necessary in order to defeat the real enemy, the thing that unbridled over-confidence drives us inexorably towards: War itself.

---

Chapter IX - Iraq 2003

A First Cut

Bush’s goals are extraordinarily ambitious, involving remaking not only international politics but recalcitrant societies as well, which is seen as an end in itself and a means to American security. For better or (and?) for worse, the United States has set itself tasks that prudent states would shun.

Robert Jervis ¹

How could the Administration have thought that it was safe to proceed in blithe indifference to the warnings of nearly everyone with operational experience in modern military occupations? Saying that the Administration considered this a truly urgent “war of necessity” doesn’t explain the indifference. Even if it feared that Iraq might give terrorists fearsome weapons at any moment, it could still have thought more carefully about the day after the war. World War II was a war of necessity, and the United States still found time for detailed occupation planning.

James Fallows ²

In this final chapter, I investigate whether over-confidence continues to occur in international relations by looking at the 2003 war in Iraq. Do rogue states exhibit over-confidence that increases the chance of war? And are the ever-more open western democracies still prone to positive illusions that compromise their ability to deal with such problems? These are important questions given the likely security threats of the 21st century.

By the criteria of this book’s other case studies, the Iraq war should feature few positive illusions: On the Iraqi side, there had been many years of interaction with the U.S., alternative options to avoid war were available (such as declaring its WMD status and cooperating with UN weapons inspectors), and its assessments regarding the likely outcome of war should have been simple (Iraq had already experienced its relative military inferiority in the 1991 Gulf War, and

since then U.S. military capabilities had grown extensively while Iraq’s had declined). On the U.S. side, there was a long period of time to evaluate the decision for war, alternative options were clearly available, and U.S. intelligence capabilities (independent of the quality of their interpretation) are at an all time high. In addition, the war in Iraq should be free from any impact of a novel theory because its causes are well known – the U.S. held rationalist motives for initiating war (regardless of one’s stance on whether these were justified or not).

Despite the above factors, there is evidence that both sides exhibited positive illusions. In particular, Saddam exhibited an extraordinary level of overconfidence in believing that he could risk war. Even if he did not expect to win, he clearly under-estimated the coalition’s military. He apparently believed that Bush was bluffing, that pressure from U.S. domestic politics or the international community would prevent war itself, that these audiences would force the termination of any actual conflict before it was won, or, even if that failed, that somehow he would cling on to his power. Why else would he have so blatantly allowed Iraqi policy to collide with the U.S.? It is unreasonable to assume that Saddam resigned himself to being destroyed, risking his own and family members lives, and expecting that his country would be occupied by his archenemy – American soldiers. Saddam has demonstrated for decades his desire to stay alive and stay in power, and for him, ‘these two goals are absolutely paramount.’ He could have avoided war if he had openly declared the status of all of his WMD programs. The fact that he pushed the brinkmanship over the edge may be explained by positive illusions – particularly given that erroneous beliefs were unlikely to be corrected in his tyrannical regime, and by a government that lacked any semblance of open debate.

On the other side, underlying U.S. motives were long in coming and rational in origin (whether they were good or bad motives is a separate issue). In particular, the failure of Iraq to comply with U.N. resolutions and cease development of WMD was seen by the Bush Administration, in the light of the new security environment after 9/11, as demanding Saddam’s compliance, by any means necessary including war. As Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee, ‘The coalition did not act in Iraq because of dramatic new evidence of Iraq’s pursuit of weapons of mass murder. We acted because we saw the existing evidence in a new light, through the prism of our experience on September 11.’ The U.S. believed that Saddam could not be deterred from using WMD in the future. At a proximate level, the U.S. could consider war as a viable policy option to deal with the situation given a well-founded expectation of military superiority. Their vast technological and organizational supremacy was obvious and, as we now know, the invasion itself was a crushing military victory.

However, the invasion was always going to be the easiest phase of the overall U.S. intervention in Iraq. War made sense only if the subsequent nation building would also be successful. This broader mission, which is far from accomplished, has of course been plagued with difficulties. While one should caution against making judgements with hindsight, and the extensive press attention given to internal conflicts in Washington and the slightest hint of failure in Iraq, U.S. policy nevertheless reflect high expectations that conflicted with a number of

contemporary assessments. There is copious evidence that expectations and planning were systematically biased in a positive, over-confident direction at the pre-war phase (that their cause was just; WMD would be discovered; they could achieve their aims unilaterally; costs and obstacles of reconstruction would be low), during the war itself (that U.S. troops would be welcomed as liberators; Iraq would erupt in a spontaneous uprising against Saddam; war-time resistance would be limited) and, most significantly, during the postwar phase (that post-war resistance would be limited; Iraqi troops would be used for security and policing; Iraqi infrastructure would remain fairly intact; oil would pay for the reconstruction; Iraq would embrace democracy).

These optimistic assumptions appear to have directly contributed to the decision that the war should be fought (or at least that the gamble was worth taking). One could make the argument that they represent fairly inconsequential mistakes and that, overall, given the massive undertaking, things are going OK. But over-confidence may well have exacerbated the costs that were incurred in achieving and exploiting success – costs that accrued in time, dollars, diplomatic relationships, enthusiasm for democracy, and lives. Considering the grossly inflated claims about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, and the expense and damage of both the invasion and the peace (not to mention U.S. prestige), the war may only represent a Pyrrhic victory – a victory that, though obtained, was too costly. As Joshua Marshall put it recently, ‘the Bush Administration greatly exaggerated the scale and imminence of the danger Saddam posed, while dramatically under-estimating the costs and burden of the postwar occupation.’ How could the democratic U.S., with all its checks and balances, be led so astray in its pre-war intelligence and then fail to plan for exigencies of occupation that numerous studies predicted?

Accusations of over-confidence might sound like a stereotypical critique of the Bush administration. However, mine is not a political argument. Hawks from the political right are as interested in convincing other states to cooperate without having to fight as are doves from the political left. For the effective containment of ‘rogue states’ and the maintenance of a credible deterrent threat, failures are disastrous. When it does come to war, both political extremes want to prosecute it well. Over-confidence in this case, if it exists, is bad for the U.S. as a whole (and the world), not just for Bush. People that supported the war should be as disappointed with the results as those that did not – its promised success, and assurances of its low economic and military burden, was a component of its justification. Moreover, if the war was going to happen, it presented a one-off opportunity to create a democracy in the Middle East. If it fails, it will be an opportunity squandered and experiment not to be repeated for a long time to come.

IRAQI OVER-CONFIDENCE

Although I primarily focus on the U.S. side of the war, I will start out by noting that the Iraqi leadership expressed a remarkable confidence that directly contributed to conflict. Prior to the invasion, Saddam Hussein was well aware of the risks of war given the proof of U.S. military supremacy during the 1991 Gulf War – and it was common knowledge that bombing and technology had improved even further since then. After that earlier rude awakening to reality, his

---

apparent willingness to bring on a new war in 2003 against an even more powerful foe is therefore surprising. Choosing to fight might have been logical if he had staged some large-scale counter attack with weapons of mass destruction – but there is little evidence that any were actually available, let alone deployed in order to do so (although it seems Saddam might have been led to think so). It might also have been logical if he had expected a long guerrilla war to drag out the conflict – but again, a resistance large enough to allow him to remain in power appears to have been hugely optimistic. The Taliban leadership’s ruinous defiance of western coalitions in the 2002 Afghanistan war suggests a similar overconfidence that, somehow, American led forces would fail to oust them.

Saddam’s past suggests that an over-confident expectation of victory was fairly typical: ‘The only wars that Saddam Hussein has ever won have been against his own people. He miscalculated when he invaded Iran in 1980, and then again in 1990 when he invaded Kuwait.’ He nevertheless survived each time to re-enact such bellicosity. Before the 1991 war, one official Iraqi newspaper claimed that ‘Saddam Hussein’s army will trample under the feet of its heroes the heads of Bush’s soldiers, crush their bones and send them to America wrapped in miserable coffins.’ It seems probable that in 2003, Saddam was planning to fight the war in a way that would make it too costly for U.S. domestic politics to bear, as he had hoped to do in 1991:

‘The idea was to draw the Americans into heavy, and politically intolerable, casualties on the battlefield, but he had no answer to American air power, which pounded his troops into desertion and demoralisation, and missed the US Army’s ability to manoeuvre large forces so that the ground attacks came from unexpected directions. Also false was his hope that he could divide the substantial coalition against him, using Scud missiles to frighten the Saudis while goading Israel into a punitive response.’

Such a strategy could have been expected to be more likely to work this time, given that soldiers would be coming into cities like Baghdad, an urban warfare scenario that might have turned into a Stalingrad, with enormous casualties. Saddam also seemed to expect to ravage U.S. communication and supply lines, which worked to some extent, but he nevertheless ‘underestimated our ability to respond even at that sub-tactical level, with troops against troops.’ The Washington Post’s Pentagon correspondent Thomas Ricks found that ‘The Iraqis – Iraqi civilians, Iraqi leadership – were kind of stunned at the speed of the American advance. They didn’t really think it was possible. They’d seen the Americans fight before. They knew the Americans were pretty good. At the same time, I think they were genuinely surprised when the American forces showed up that quickly on the edge of Baghdad.’ General Raad Al-Hamdani, commander of Iraq’s Republican Guard south of Baghdad, claimed that (even knowing that there were no WMD assets), they distributed 6-months to a year’s worth of ammunition, and he personally expected the conflict to last for 2 or 3 months and ‘turn Iraq into another Vietnam. I

---

10 Editorial (1991) Al-Jumhouriya (Iraqi state run newspaper) 6 January
11 Freedman 'The Dictator's Strategy: Delay to Survive'
thought that American forces were unable to breach and fight face-to-face, and that we had capabilities to affect the enemy higher than what we actually saw.14

Whatever Saddam’s strategy, it is clear that he did not expect to lose so easily, if at all. Why would he have steered Iraq on a collision course resulting in war if he expected it to result in his own destruction? In recent years, UN sanctions had been softened with the Oil-for-Food Program, and were increasingly likely to be lifted. At the same time, weapons inspections were effectively ended (indeed, Saddam had nothing to hide). Things were going pretty well for Saddam and he could have preserved Iraq’s recovery. ‘Only in 2002, when the Bush Administration suddenly focused its attention on Iraq, would Saddam have had any reason to change this view. And then, according to a variety of Iraqi sources, he simply refused to believe that the Americans were serious and would actually invade.’15 So it seems, firstly, he was overconfident that he would not be attacked and, secondly, that if he was, he would somehow fare not too badly on account of some mix of factors including Iraqi resistance, U.S. domestic politics, uproar in other Arab nations, international discontent, and a fear of WMD among western military planners (i.e. whether or not that threat really existed).

U.S. OVER-CONFIDENCE

On the U.S. side, the key puzzle is not that the U.S. leadership were over-confident about the initial goal of defeating Iraq militarily (few doubted that), but that they were over-confident about the overall goal of rebuilding it again afterwards. That is the larger task on which U.S. policy must be judged. A number of detailed analyses (including extensive projects at the State Department, the U.S. Army War College, USAID, Congressional Committees, and independent academics) warned that the political, military, and economic costs and consequences of a war with Iraq would be inhibitory, a cautionary consensus that now seems clear U.S. policy exceeded.16 As James Fallows asked in his detailed investigation of postwar planning, ‘How could the Administration have thought that it was safe to proceed in blithe indifference to the warnings of nearly everyone with operational experience in modern military occupations?’17 Of course, some such analyses could have been exaggerated in the other direction and some of them wrong, but their volume, concordance and prescience makes it is hard to argue today that there was not some degree, large or small, of over-confidence by the U.S. administration. Certainly, various different policy components systematically erred in the positive direction. The U.S. government’s own reports and wargames highlighted the problems and generally advised caution. The Administration generally downplayed these and generally advised action.

Much of the outward confidence that the U.S. could achieve its objectives was a political tactic to bolster support in the western public and press, and to convince other audiences – not

---

17 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 74.
least the Iraqi leadership and public – that Saddam’s regime had no hope of surviving. However, irrespective of any verbal pronouncements that may have reflected spin rather than substance, a number of facts demonstrate that excessive confidence was a genuine belief held privately among leaders too. These facts, outlined below, betray great expectations that cannot be merely the result of media hype or political spin. They all follow types of over-confidence identified in Chapter 2 (see Figure 2 [the theoretical framework]): Over-estimating oneself and allies; underestimating the opponent; neglect of intelligence; and unrealistic expectations of success.

The massive movement of troops and equipment to the Middle East implies the simultaneous diplomatic wrangling at the U.N. was largely a charade. The U.S. coalition would ultimately invade regardless. If the U.N. consented, all well and good, but if not, it wouldn’t change anything. The British position echoed a similar foregone commitment. Acting hawk by undertaking the costly task of deploying troops and machines would of course lend a crucial impression of credibility for diplomatic efforts. But the sheer scale of the build up, and the impossibility of having troops and machines sit there indefinitely, signalled that the war would go ahead – unilaterally if necessary. As Jervis put it: ‘in the porous American system, it is hard for a leader who is not committed to attacking to give off extensive evidence of his willingness to do so … getting ready to fight entails such extensive military, political, and psychological mobilization that only a leader committed to carrying out the threat is likely to be willing to muster the necessary effort.’ That the U.S. (and U.K.) were prepared to go it essentially alone, against large factions of public and world opinion, meant that they were confident that the war was justified by their own criteria (e.g. WMD and regime change were legitimate reasons for war), and that they would succeed in creating a secure, stable, and democratic Iraq. Not genuinely believing this would be political suicide.

The assumption that a western style democracy and a free market economy would be worth the enormous cost of installing it forcibly in Iraq reflect the wider Bush doctrine set out in the U.S. National Security Strategy of September 2002. This is reminiscent of ‘the belief, common among powerful states, that its values are universal and their spread will benefit the entire world.’ This may turn out to be correct of course (and beneficial), but what is striking is the confidence among the U.S. leadership on this point, and the willingness to take enormous costs and risks to attempt it. As Jervis continues, previous experience ‘calls into question the links between democracy and free markets, each of which can readily undermine the other. But such doubts do not cloud official pronouncements or even off-the-record comments of top officials. The United States now appears to have a faith-based foreign policy.’ A number of authors have suggested that such a U.S. strategy will ultimately bring its own ruin. Slavoj Zizek argues that the U.S. doctrine comprises of fundamentally incompatible goals (spreading democracy, asserting its hegemony, securing oil supplies), and that these conflicting aims will ultimately prevent the U.S. from achieving what it seeks.

---

global zenith (1945-50 for us [the U.S.]) yet is at the peak of its glorious self-perception and elite sense of global entitlement.\textsuperscript{22}

Allies were over-estimated as well. The U.S. clearly found it harder than expected to garner the support of western European allies and other states for war. In the end, no second resolution advocating war was sought in the U.N. on account of the low levels of support. The cooperation of Turkey in the invasion was assumed to be virtually automatic and, as the war came closer, members of the U.S. administration ‘expressed no doubt that within days American tanks and troops would be taking up positions along Turkey’s long border with Iraq.’\textsuperscript{23} Thomas Ricks remembered ‘people at the Pentagon telling me, “Don’t worry, Turkey will eventually come on board, just like they did in 1991” ... I think the U.S. government really did believe that ultimately the Turks would come around.’\textsuperscript{24} Yet officials were apparently dumbfounded when the Turkish parliament voted against it. An entire arm of the invasion had been eliminated. This clearly unnerved a number of military and civilian planners. But the war went ahead regardless. In the end, of course, it cannot have been essential to attaining military victory, but it pushed up the risks (a heavier burden fell on the remaining invasion forces), and its absence may have led to problems later. The extra forces of the 4\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Division attacking from the north would have come right down through the ‘Sunni Triangle,’ the insurgent stronghold that was instead left to fester and regroup to become (as expected) the most violent region following the war. If it was not considered important in some respect, at least for additional security, the contingent coming in via Turkey would not have featured in the war plan.

Civilian leaders of the U.S. and U.K. officially testified to the existence of significant numbers of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, and to the imminent threat that they posed. It is now clear that this was hugely exaggerated – whether or not it was done intentionally (the need to commandeer support for the war gave obvious incentives to do so, hence the controversy). The mismatch cannot be attributed solely to faulty intelligence. Intelligence was deficient in some respects, but by far the greater problem was a biased and selective reading of it by decision-makers.\textsuperscript{25} Given this, the facts are more revealing that they may seem: The war would plainly expose the existence or non-existence of WMD to the world, so very high political costs would be incurred in falsely exaggerating this threat (as has since been demonstrated). Hence, decision-makers are likely to have genuinely believed the WMD threat, to some extent or other. As one article put it, ‘There is no doubt many British and U.S. officials really believed that Saddam had at least chemical and biological weapons – the British government certainly would never have taken the risk of waging an unpopular war if it had genuinely thought there was nothing deadly to be found in Iraq.’\textsuperscript{26} Robert Jervis concurs: ‘while much remains clear, it seems that the United States and Britain not only publicly exaggerated, but also privately overestimated, the extent of his [Saddam’s] weapons of mass destruction.’\textsuperscript{27} It can hardly have been a political game if the troops at the front were constantly suiting up for chemical warfare, among whom ‘it

\textsuperscript{27} Jervis ‘Understanding the Bush Doctrine’, p. 371.
really was an article of faith that they would be used.'

Certainly as U.S. units approached Baghdad, WMD were expected to meet them, and ‘officers believed this to their marrow.’

Well into the war, U.S. and U.K. intelligence services remained ‘confident of success’ in finding WMD. Significant money and effort continues to be expended to locate the missing weapons. Clearly, coalition leaders were over-confident about how easy it would be to find them. This is the clearest example of leaders neglecting intelligence in favour of prior assumptions, but it is important to remember that this was not limited to WMD – policy clashed with intelligence in other areas too. For example, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated in September 2002 that there was ‘bulletproof’ evidence of Iraq’s links to al Qaeda. Any such link is now widely regarded as being entirely false – and many intelligence professionals said as much at the time. What seemed bulletproof was tendency for the U.S. leadership to assert that supportive intelligence reports were correct, while contradictory ones were not. A Congressional Research Service specialist, Louis Fisher, argued that ‘the administration treated intelligence as a science, yielding certitude, not doubt.’

The Administration even set up its own ad hoc agency in the Pentagon (the ‘Office of Special Plans’) to evaluate raw intelligence themselves. Kenneth Pollack and others argue that this augmented the cherry-picking approach: ‘Selecting reports that supported the Administration’s pre-existing position and ignoring all the rest ... [regular] intelligence analysts spent huge amounts of time fighting bad information and trying to persuade Administration officials not to make policy decisions based on it.’ Most problematic, officials at the Office of Special Plans handed incriminatory analyses direct to cabinet members (sometimes including raw and unverified intelligence). Worse still, this highly unusual information flow sometimes led directly to public pronouncements on ‘facts’ that intelligence professionals knew to be dubious or wrong. This faulty process applied to information both on WMD and on likely post-war dangers. Pollack suggested that, ‘As best I can tell, these [Administration] officials were guilty not of lying but of creative omission. They discussed only those elements of intelligence estimates that served their cause.’ An example was the claim that Iraq could have a nuclear weapon within a year. That concern did feature in intelligence analyses as a possibility – but only given a crucial assumption: That fissile material could be obtained from abroad. Since that event in itself was deemed extremely unlikely, the whole time-frame represented a highly selective argument. This idiosyncratic use of information harks back to David Dunning’s work showing that positive illusions are created, maintained and reinforced by selecting criteria and topics conducive to one’s self-serving interests. ‘This problem raised its head in postwar planning too: ‘It’s ironic that we 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.’

Positive illusions may stem from cognitive or motivational biases (see Chapter 1), and these different origins may help to explain U.S. over-confidence. Although the potential for cognitive biases should be common among all individuals involved in the war, they may have had an unusual impact on U.S. policy outcomes because of failings in the democratic process and openness of debate, such that initial biases evaded normal checks and balances of government (I will return to this later). At this point, I want to focus on how the WMD issue offers an opportunity to identify a motivated source for positive illusions, by comparing different actors who had the same information but different motivations. If positive illusions were the result of a motivated conviction that war was required, we would expect to see an exaggeration of the WMD threat in the U.K. as well as the U.S. but not in countries that were against the war and yet agreed on the intelligence assessment, such as Germany and France. This prediction is of course supported by events. The U.K. had a similar political investment in the war to the U.S., and also hyped the intelligence and ‘imminent threat’ logic to an enormous degree. As with the U.S., this hype cannot be solely attributed to political reasons: Tony Blair in particular could expect to suffer enormous political costs for exaggerating this threat if it turned out to be false (by what would be a very public discovery or non-discovery of WMD following the war). Indeed, he has been and continues to be in danger of losing office as a direct result. It is therefore highly probable that he privately believed this threat, a belief that was augmented by motivated bias – over and above any political expediency.

France and Germany, on the other hand, did not exaggerate the imminence of the threat even though they shared the U.S.’s and U.K.’s intelligence assessment, also believing that Iraq harboured significant WMD programs. Note that this is so even though German intelligence should, if anything, bias them towards support for war: ‘Somewhat remarkably, given how adamantly Germany would oppose the war, the German Federal Intelligence Service held the bleakest view of all, arguing that Iraq might be able to build a nuclear weapon [on their own] within three years.’

As an extension of this argument, we also see an exaggeration of the WMD threat and post-war dangers, in various places in the Bush Administration staff (and indeed among some Iraqi exiles), but not so often among the non-aligned civil service departments, who were typically far less sanguine about the imminence (or existence) of the threat. Only the former group of people have incentives to promote policy goals. Bearing in mind the unlikelihood that this belief was solely staged for political purposes – for the reasons described above – the distinction points to motivated bias as a source of over-confidence. As Senator Edward Kennedy noted:

‘Over two centuries ago, John Adams spoke eloquently about the need to let facts and evidence guide actions and policies. He said, “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.” Listen to those words again, and you can hear John Adams speaking to us now about Iraq. “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.” Tragically, in making the decision to go to war in Iraq, the Bush

---

administration allowed its wishes, its inclinations, and its passions to alter the state of facts and the evidence of the threat we faced from Iraq.'

**HOW THE WAR PLAN TRIPPED UP THE OCCUPATION**

Several failures of the occupation phase spawned from overoptimistic expectations of what the invasion forces should consist of and be prepared for at the moment of victory. Potential post-war problems were partly devalued and under-discussed in order to garner support for launching the war itself. Rumsfeld’s people – in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) – seem to have held the opinion that ‘postwar planning was an impediment to war. Because detailed thought about the postwar situation meant facing costs and potential problems, and thus weakened the case for launching a “war of choice” (the Washington term for a war waged in immediate self-defense), it could be seen as an “antiwar” undertaking … during the months when the Administration was making its case for the war – successfully to Congress, less so to the United Nations – it acted as if the long run should be thought about only later on.’

As a result of this, war planning went effectively unhampered by post-war realities, and also promoted wishful thinking – a necessary hope that the aftermath would go OK, given that the war itself was taken as a given.

Having fewer troops in the actual invasion force meant that too few soldiers were available to establish order solidly and rapidly in the critical hours and days after the war ended. ‘The problem was simply that we didn’t have enough troops, that the troops we had were not trained to transition from war to peacekeeping, and that there was no clear plan in place for how we would do the peacekeeping.’

Before the war, many in the U.S. Army recognised that a large, perhaps unwieldy invasion force would – quite apart from the military demands of the invasion itself – nevertheless be crucial to lock down the country’s law and order effectively after victory, the so-called consolidation and exploitation phase. Eric Shinseki, the Army Chief of Staff, specifically stated the need for a large number of troops to deal with post-war chaos in a 25 February 2003 Senate Armed Services Committee on the war and its aftermath. His argument was that, on the basis of reports by ‘the Army War College, by every other group that looked into this … there was a crucial moment just after the fall of a regime when the potential for disorder was enormous. So there would be ripple effects for years to come, depending on what happened in those first days or weeks when the regime went down.’

In defiance, Under-secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz testified that it was ‘hard to imagine’ that more U.S. forces would be needed for post-war duties than for the invasion itself. Wolfowitz ‘had a pretty optimistic view of Iraq, and postwar Iraq. He really genuinely did think that Shinseki’s estimate was off – that it would not take several hundred thousand troops to occupy Iraq, that it would be an easier proposition than Shinseki was describing as being – because I think Wolfowitz thought that Iraqis generally would welcome us.’

This was astounding given that ‘None of the government working groups that had seriously looked into the question had simply “imagined” that

---

39 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 58.
occupying Iraq would be more difficult than defeating it. They had presented years’ worth of experience suggesting that this would be the central reality of the undertaking.' \(^{43}\)

‘Far from being an imaginary concept, this idea that the occupation was the hard part was the heart of the Army’s prewar argument.’ \(^{44}\)

Similar problems have occurred in Afghanistan. While fewer forces were successful in achieving a military victory over the Taliban, this may have had negative repercussions there in the long term. First, the U.S. relied on local warlords to bear the brunt of the fighting, and these factions are now empowered from the gains they made in the war. Second, the Taliban were not entirely eradicated and still pose a significant danger to the new state. Third, security in general remains poor. Fourth, perhaps most significantly given the motive for war, the smaller U.S. forces involved ‘may also have contributed to Osama bin Laden’s escape by leaving the early searching to poorly equipped Afghan militias and Pakistani border forces with no strong motivation to succeed.’ \(^{45}\)

After the fall of Baghdad, the power vacuum that allowed the looting, revenge attacks, dispersal of Iraqi soldiers, influx of foreign terrorists and so on tipped the country down a slippery slope from which it would, and did, prove difficult to recover (as we shall see, this was in no way unforeseen by pre-war U.S. government analyses). These initial failures ‘spilled over’ to taint the security situation long afterwards. \(^{46}\) Rumsfeld’s new doctrine of small, highly manoeuvrable forces may therefore have shone for the purposes of the invasion but nevertheless foreclosed the opportunity to properly exploit the post-victory advantage. Many have blamed Rumsfeld for recklessly pushing too small an invasion force, although it should be noted that this reflected a long-term Department of Defense plan for transforming U.S. war fighting methods: To exploit enormous changes in technology, and to move the Army away from the ‘George McClellan’ type force of the Civil War, "too cautious, too ponderous, too unwilling to take risks." \(^{47}\) There were also various political motivations for a smaller invasion force in Iraq – to minimise the impact on civilians, to bypass southern cities to topple Baghdad and end the war quickly, and to keep the concentration of allied troops funnelling through Kuwait to a minimum (in case this proved a WMD target). \(^{48}\)

But the key issue remains the greater problem of the military force required for what was to follow. As Fred Kagan put it: ‘The issue about overwhelming force and the Rumsfeld doctrine is less about defeating the enemy’s armed forces and more about what happens after those armed forces are defeated.’ \(^{49}\) One of the Army War College report’s authors, Conrad Crane, reminds us that ‘while the rules for achieving military victory with a modernized military against a force as inept as the Iraqis might indeed have been transformed, the rules about maintaining stability and reconstructing regimes have not.’ \(^{50}\) This was not guess work, but a lesson from history: ‘insights from successful occupations suggest that it is best to go in real heavy and then draw down fast.’ \(^{51}\)

\(^{43}\) Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 73.
\(^{50}\) Conrad Crane, U.S. Army War College, personal communication.
\(^{51}\) Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 65.
Defense Department sources revealed that Rumsfeld had insisted on troop numbers being reduced at least six times before the war, ‘in the face of frequent warnings by his military advisers that such a plan was dangerous and reckless.’\(^\text{52}\) On the other side of the debate, ‘The military’s fundamental argument for building up what Rumsfeld considered a wastefully large force is that it would be even more useful after Baghdad fell than during actual combat. The first few days or weeks after the fighting in this view, were crucial in setting long-term expectations … The heart of the Army’s argument was that with too few soldiers, the United States would win the war only to be trapped in an untenable position during the occupation.’\(^\text{53}\) Marine General Anthony Zinni (forerunner of Tommy Franks as CENTCOM commander) told Fallows that Iraq wargames in the 1990s had tended to use more forces: ‘The reason we had those two extra divisions was the security situation. Revenge killings, crime, chaos – this was all foreseeable.’\(^\text{54}\)

Pushing the invasion through (and doing so hastily) despite warnings of the likely problems left post-war preparations under-planned and short-changed for the tasks to come. As Robert Trivers put it: ‘the self-deception that led to these biased predictions also prevented the U.S. from dealing with the reality after it emerged.’\(^\text{55}\) The lack of law and order, humanitarian aid, and civilian services at the outset set a poor example that may have then primed other foreign governments to avoid deploying their own peacekeepers into the chaos. Peter Galbraith, a former U.S. Ambassador to Croatia, told a congressional committee in June that ‘when the United States entered Baghdad on April 9, it entered a city largely undamaged by a carefully executed military campaign. However, in the three weeks following the US take over, unchecked looting effectively gutted every important public institution in the city.’\(^\text{56}\) The miniature Army that fought and won such a decisive victory lacked the size and preparation that many had argued would be necessary to consolidate its success.

People often talked of ‘decapitating’ the regime, after which Iraq was expected to capitulate instantly. But as Thomas Ricks put it, what happened in reality was ‘Iraq became like a chicken running around with its head cut off, in fact in some ways harder to deal with, harder to catch … It was an extremely optimistic war plan at its core … It assumed a lot of things about postwar Iraq … The Bush Administration, I think, really pushed aside those concerns, didn’t want to hear them, didn’t want to talk about them. I don’t know quite why they didn’t want to talk about it. It really puzzles me … All I can think is they really did believe what they were being told by Iraqi exiles – that this would be a piece of cake after Saddam Hussein was knocked off.’\(^\text{57}\)

A key character in this debate was Rumsfeld, who became known for his ‘teflon-like irrepressible confidence that had clung to him from the moment that he rushed from his Pentagon office on September 11 to tend to the wounded – a moment that transformed him overnight into a national hero … In Afghanistan, a war won with air strikes guided by small teams of special forces and ground battles led by militia, Mr Rumsfeld’s vision appeared vindicated. So, too, did his unbridled enthusiasm for a pre-emptive, aggressive American foreign policy. After September 11 he embodied a confidence born of unchallenged US might.’\(^\text{58}\) Secretary of the Army Thomas

\(^{52}\) Reid, T. (2003a) ‘Washington Hawks Face Unfriendly Fire for "Cheap War"' The Times (London) 31 March

\(^{53}\) Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 64, 65.

\(^{54}\) Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 65.

\(^{55}\) Robert Trivers, personal communication.

\(^{56}\) Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 73.


\(^{58}\) Reid, T. (2003b) ‘Rumsfeld Shows Strain as He Comes in the Line of Fire' The Times (London) 29 March
White, commenting on Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz’s rift with the Army over troop numbers, noted ‘a certain amount of arrogance to both of them in this regard,’ and that neither ‘is a man that I would say was burdened by a great deal of self-doubt.’ The successes of Afghanistan convinced them that they would be ‘absolutely right’ in Iraq as well. If the problems in Iraq were difficult enough, they could have been even worse. Had Rumsfeld’s preference gone unchecked, there might only have been 75,000 troops in the invasion force, in contrast to the 400,000 demanded by the Army. In the end, some 200,000 troops were involved. In this case, the fairly open institutions and civil-military interactions led to some success in compromising Rumsfeld’s preference about how many troops would be needed. In an alternative regime (say, if Rumsfeld had been a dictator) his preference for a significantly smaller invasion force than the army demanded might have gone unchecked. That would have been an even greater disaster.

PROBLEMS WITH POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION

More American soldiers have been killed in post-war Iraq than during the invasion itself (up to the declared end of ‘major combat operations’ on 1 May 2003). The continued attacks on the U.S. military, other foreign peacekeeping forces, new Iraqi recruits and police, on civilian targets (including the UN), the spiralling costs and the controversial progress of the new model democracy has already led many to label American policy in Iraq a failure. There are similar but less well-reported problems in post-war Afghanistan (e.g. not enough money spent on reconstruction, a failure to muster a solid international peacekeeping force) which is not bad luck, but rather ‘flows from a succession of bad American policy decisions.’

Many of those opposed to the Iraq war believe their opinion of wider U.S. policy has proven correct – win the war they might, but winning the peace they would not. Or, if they do, at too great a cost. Certainly, the U.S. has faced ‘a more lethal insurgency than it had bargained for.’ It was always going to be difficult task in a country containing three mutually hostile ethnic groups suddenly set free after decades of tyranny. But it is uncontroversial to say that the U.S. leadership underestimated this difficulty – beyond whatever comprehension of the challenges they did have. As Fred Kagan put it: ‘We underestimated the difficulty of establishing a new, stable, democratic Iraq. It’s very clear, if you go back and look at our leaders’ statements before the war, they thought that it was going to be relatively easy, and it’s turned out to be relatively hard. Honestly, I don’t understand why they thought that it was going to be easy. It seems evident that it would be a hard thing to do.’

The unexpected extension of tours of duty for tens of thousands of National Guard and Reserves reveals that, regardless of what anyone might claim, the task of occupation and reconstruction exceeded what the U.S. had planned for.

And this cannot be attributed to a lack of information about the likely outcomes. Positive illusions are implicated because the government was made aware of the likely problems of the post-war reconstruction, it was not some unlucky surprise. James Fallows detailed the numerous reports from within the U.S. administration which made accurate predictions about what would

60 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’.
61 Editorial 'High Risks in Afghanistan'
63 Unattributed (2003) 'Iraq: Failure Begins to Look Possible' The Economist 1 November
happen in post-war Iraq, and which were circulated in Washington. These, it seems, were not factored into U.S. policy. Indeed, there are specific examples of Administration officials disregarding them. Whatever the situation in Iraq may have become by now, the initial and crucial first few months were an unnecessary disaster:

‘The Administration will be admired in retrospect for how much knowledge it created about the challenge it was taking on. U.S. government predictions about postwar Iraq’s problems have proved as accurate as the assessments of pre-war Iraq’s strategic threat have proved flawed. But the Administration will be condemned for what it did with what was known. The problems the United States has encountered are precisely the ones its own expert agencies warned against. Exactly what went wrong with the occupation will be studies for years – or should be. The missteps of the first half year in Iraq are as significant as other classic and carefully examined failures in foreign policy, including John Kennedy’s handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion, in 1961, and Lyndon Johnson’s decision to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam, in 1965 … its missteps have come at a heavy cost. And the ongoing financial, diplomatic, and human cost of the Iraq occupation is the more grievous in light of the advance warnings the government had.’

Three major projects within U.S. government circles warned of the likely chaos and difficulties in postwar Iraq, and specified recommendations for how to avert them. First, there was the State Department’s ‘Future of Iraq’ project, which drew on department staff, Iraqi exile organisations and outside experts (with an initial grant of $5 million). Some of these exiles had a vested interest in promoting the war, but they also had a vested interest in producing a stable postwar Iraq. So while they may have encouraged war, they would also have wanted the U.S. to succeed in the postwar phase. The 13 volume, 2,500 page report detailed key tasks to ensure a stable occupation. As an example, ‘a recurring theme was the urgency of restoring electricity and water supplies as soon as possible after regime change.’ An Air Force investigator independently warned that this would be a significant post-war problem if it was targeted (his reports were later disregarded by administration officials). In the end, ‘damage to the electrical grid was a major post-war problem,’ which disposed the Iraqi population towards the opinion that the U.S. was not doing as much as it could to ensure essential humanitarian needs. Other themes included ways to disband and reuse the Iraqi army, and ways to avert chaos, looting and fighting in the aftermath of war. Overall, the report stressed that the U.S. should not see Iraq like another Afghanistan, but more like the tasks facing the U.S. in restoring Germany and Japan after World War II (analogies that members of the administration used themselves, ironically) and which should therefore be expected to require years of investment and troop presence. What is clear is that, ‘long before combat began, the explicit recommendations and implicit lessons of the Future of Iraq Project had given the U.S. government a very good idea of what political conflicts it could expect in Iraq.’

A second important information gathering project was the ‘Iraq Working Group’ – run by USAID and involving numerous NGOs with extensive experience of post-war conflict situations. The group voiced increasing concern for a failure to plan for likely humanitarian and civilian

65 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 54.
66 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 57.
67 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 70.
68 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 58.
challenges. Many participants remarked on a general disinterest of officials involved, and the lack of attention to the problems from high level decision-makers.

A third report was a study on the postwar challenges written by the U.S. Army War College. Reviewing the history of previous U.S. occupations, they identified successful solutions to common problems. The report also detailed the specific tasks likely to arise in Iraq, stressing that prolonged U.S. presence would bring resentment, so a multinational force should be installed as quickly as possible. The summary of conclusions makes striking reading:

‘To be successful, an occupation such as that contemplated after any hostilities in Iraq requires much detailed interagency planning, many forces, multi-year military commitment, and a national commitment to nationbuilding. Recent American experiences with post-conflict operations have generally featured poor planning, problems with relevant military force structure, and difficulties with a handover from military to civilian responsibility. To conduct their share of the essential tasks that must be accomplished to reconstruct an Iraqi state, military forces will be severely taxed in military police, civil affairs, engineer, and transportation units, in addition to possible severe security difficulties. The administration of an Iraqi occupation will be complicated by deep religious, ethnic, and tribal differences which dominate Iraqi society. U.S. forces may have to manage and adjudicate conflicts among Iraqis that they can barely comprehend. An exit strategy will require the establishment of political stability, which will be difficult to achieve given Iraq’s fragmented population, weak political institutions, and propensity for rule by violence.’

This report was certainly seen by the Army and the U.S. Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA). One of the ORHA staff held up a copy at a Washington meeting and cautioned that, while useful, ‘it was not the plan.’ The report was also seen by CENTOM (U.S. Central Command), and it is therefore unclear why it did not make as much impact there as it might have done among Army personnel. According to some, Tommy Franks, while clashing with Rumsfeld to some extent over force strengths, had generally ‘drunk the Kool-aid’ with regard to the Army transformation, and CENTCOM, as well as the Administration, may therefore have relayed the omission into war planning. Fallows noted that if the War College report sounded familiar, ‘that is because every organization that looked seriously into the situation sounded the same note.’

People sometimes argue that post-war planning was necessarily limited because the act of planning for a post-war occupation made war itself look certain, just when diplomatic efforts to avoid war was a crucial political signal. However, this is no justification for a lack of planning. Such planning could have gone on outside the public eye, it does not mean it need not be done at all. In any case, much planning was done. The problem was that it was not adequately incorporated into policy decisions. A further factor that may have permitted rosy assumptions to prevail was that U.S. institutions were not used to coordinating such a massive multi-task effort and their roles and responsibilities were not properly integrated (nor are U.S. soldiers ideally

70 Conrad Crane, personal communication.
72 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’ , p. 68.
suited to post-war policing). Each group tended to focus on its own task while assuming that other key phases would be independently successful. Fallows cited a former postwar planner as lamenting that, ‘If you went to the Pentagon before the war, all the concentration was on the war. If you went there during the war, all the concentration was on the war. And if you went there after the war, they’d say, “That’s Jerry Bremer’s job”.’

Whether or not there were positive illusions about the security aspects of the occupation, U.S. government officials also ‘woefully underestimated the cost of reconstructing Iraq.’ Budget estimates made by those outside the Administration, as well as those leaked from within, were consistently very high (and, with hindsight, accurate). No official estimates were given until well after the war. Some discount this as a valid criticism of the administration because cost forecasts were pointless in the light of fundamental uncertainties about how the war and reconstruction would go – this was a leitmotif followed by Rumsfeld and others in the administration. However, this is a faulty argument. Both high estimates as well as high uncertainty would mean that U.S. policy was taking great risks. Either should have caused caution, and so neither can be used as a defence of policy. Indeed, democracies do not normally sanction projects that lack a price tag – at the least, a range of values would have been quite possible to attempt: ‘Anyone who actually wanted to make an estimate [of the financial costs of post-war Iraq] had plenty of information on hand.’ Yet, ‘When administration officials stopped being vague, they started being unrealistic … Precisely because he could not foresee all hazards, he [Rumsfeld] should have been more zealous about avoiding the ones that were evident – the big and obvious ones the rest of the government tried to point out to him.’

One insider, Lawrence Lindsay, the chief White House economic advisor, suggested at one point to the Wall Street Journal a figure of $100-200 billion, and, according to Fallows, was forced to resign soon afterwards. ‘Lindsay’s example could hardly have encouraged others in the Administration to be forthcoming with financial projections. Indeed, no one who remained in the Administration offered a plausible cost estimate until months after the war began.’

In a sense, the Bush Administration was politically ingenious to avoid doing so and they got away with it – so far. Once the U.S. was in Iraq, Congress was hardly going to deny them the money to make sure the U.S. was not disgraced. But once again, Bush had an election to face in 2004, so the political risks were high enough and soon enough to lend credence to the notion that they genuinely believed the costs would remain low. Administration officials really had under-estimated the costs.

Positive illusions about the financial burden appear to have been buoyed up by two highly optimistic assumptions: First, that Iraqi infrastructure would be relatively intact; and second, that Iraqi oil would largely finance the reconstruction. Both were very wrong. The power grid and numerous other crucial Iraqi infrastructures were wrecked. Wolfowitz told Congress that Iraq’s oil should generate $50-$100 in revenues within two to three years. The real figures looks like it will be zero in the first year, $12 billion in the second, and $20 billion after that – as long as oil prices stay high. As a report from the Council on Foreign Relations and Rice University put it:

---

73 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 68
74 Elliott ‘So, What Went Wrong?’ , p. 35.
75 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 66.
76 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 66, 74.
77 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 62.
‘There has been a great deal of wishful thinking about Iraqi oil.’79 A further faulty assumption about costs was the extent of the international community’s commitment to post-war reconstruction. This seems to have been especially optimistic given that reconstruction was initially directed through the Pentagon, giving preference to American companies. In September 2003, the Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing to consider justification for the extra $87 billion needed to finance the post-war reconstruction. Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz was admonished for his positive illusions: ‘You yourself, told Congress in March that “We are dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction and relatively soon” … Talk about rosy scenarios.’80 John McCain charged that the administration ‘clearly underestimated the size of the challenge we would face.’ Democratic senator Tom Harkin was moved to remark that ‘This may not be Vietnam, but boy, it sure smells like it. And every time I see these bills coming down for the money, it’s costing like Vietnam, too.’

Costs aside, the Administration underestimated the level of armed resistance as well – both during the invasion and after it (by Iraqi soldiers, Saddam loyalists, and foreign terrorists). Ricks claimed ‘I’ve had junior officers tell me quite bitterly how they were misinformed … U.S. soldiers were told they would be greeted as liberators.’81 As soon as the war began, Pentagon officials ‘conceded that they had underestimated the resistance they would face in other parts of the country.’82 General Wesley Clark noted that although Saddam loyalists were both ‘well-reported abroad’ and CIA analysts ‘told policymakers about this threat,’ they were nevertheless ‘under-estimated’ and ‘somehow it wasn’t factored into coalition planning.’83 The upshot was that a large proportion of combat troops became involved in ‘fighting in the rear.’ A number of officials conceded that they ‘had underestimated the vulnerability of the American supply line and the potency of the guerrilla-style resistance led by the 40,000-strong Fedayin militia that is loyal to Saddam.’84 Even during the war, CIA analysts reported to the press that war planners had ignored warnings about the potential for guerrilla activity and tactics. The military historian John Keegan wrote that ‘the coalition had anticipated battle with the Iraqi army and the Republican Guard. It had not apparently made allowance for the emergence of the Fedayeen, the militia personally loyal to Saddam, or the arming of Ba’ath party activists.’85 He concluded that ‘there probably are too few troops, the result of an under-estimation of the size of the military problem by people in the Pentagon,’ and exacerbated by ‘the failure of the Iraqi army to desert in large numbers, as was optimistically expected.’

There were similar optimistic expectations about a popular uprising. Saddam’s regime was of course brutal and widely unpopular, but past evidence and pre-war intelligence gave little reason to expect a rapid revolt against him. ‘The Shi’ites, who rose up against the regime in the south in 1991 and were slaughtered for their impudence, were going to do nothing so rash this time. According to one of their leaders, they will sit tight until Baghdad is under siege and Saddam’s loyalists are on the run. Western intelligence should have known that.’86 If the intelligence agencies did know, it did not seem to have been wholly reflected in U.S. policy:

79 Elliott ‘So, What Went Wrong?’ , p. 36.
84 Watson and Evans ‘Us Calls up 30,000 New Troops’
86 Editorial (2003c) ‘Tell It Straight’ The Times (London) 30 March
'The Pentagon let it be known that the Iraqi people were ready to kick out Saddam Hussein. Even his government had had enough. Just a firm nudge would topple him. Rumsfeld’s small, adaptable force would race to Baghdad to fill the power vacuum, and be welcomed as liberators. Even U.S. commanders bought this line: “What we were really hoping was to just go through and everyone would wave flags and stuff,” said one brigadier general this week. But Rumsfeld seems to have been blinded by American technological superiority.'

Of course, the insurgency continued long after the war. In the summer of 2003, Rumsfeld claimed the attacks were just a small number of Baathist ‘dead-enders.’ By November 2003, a CIA report warned that the guerrilla war is ‘in danger of escalating out of US control.’ Reputed figures of up to 50,000 insurgents may have been too high, ‘but it does indicate a deep-rooted revolt on a far greater scale than the Pentagon had led the administration to believe.’ Unusually for an internal CIA report, according to some newspaper reports, it was circulated widely and endorsed by Paul Bremer, head of the U.S. occupation in Iraq which some speculated was ‘a possible sign that he was seeking to bypass his superiors in the Pentagon and send a message directly to President George Bush on how bad the situation has become.’ Certainly, the recent speeding up of plans to allow an Iraqi take over of the governing coalition strongly suggests a realisation among the Bush administration of dire straits much worse than were expected, and a need to get out as soon as possible – ideally of course before the 2004 U.S. elections. In reality, the difficult situation demands the opposite – that they may have to (or should) stay longer than they initially hoped. The clash of overly optimistic expectations and the desire to extract itself as a result of this failing may lead to greater disaster still.

It was obviously impossible to predict exactly how the occupation would pan out. But again this does not offer any defence. James Fallows argued that while ‘the administration could not have known everything about what it would find in Iraq,’ of course, ‘it could have – and should have – done more than it did.’ Reports piled up in Washington, but once the American post-war leader Jay Garner arrived in Iraq, he had to start from scratch, ‘trying to familiarize himself with what the rest of the government had already done.’ Rumsfeld had told him not to ‘waste his time’ reading the Future of Iraq Project report, and when Garner brought its director, Thomas Warrick, on to his staff, Rumsfeld forced Warrick’s dismissal. Various studies had advised that post-war Iraq would descend into chaos immediately if the invading forces were not large enough and prepared enough. As in similar post-war environments elsewhere in the world, looting, revenge violence, and a hostile reaction to occupying soldiers were to be expected. Rumsfeld’s obsession with ‘uncertainty,’ both in invasion planning and post-war planning, became a reckless evasion of responsibility. He had only disdain for “predictions,” yes, and no one could have forecast every circumstance of postwar Baghdad. But virtually everyone who had thought about the issue had warned about the risk of looting. U.S. soldiers could have prevented

---

87 Editorial (2003a) 'A War Like Any Other: Never Be Seduced by the Lure of High-Tech Weaponry' New Scientist 5 April
88 Kher ‘3 Flawed Assumptions About Postwar Iraq’.
89 Borger, J. and R. McCarthy (2003) 'We Could Lose This Situation' The Guardian 13 November
90 Fallows 'Blind into Baghdad', p. 54.
91 Fallows 'Blind into Baghdad', p. 72.
it – and would have, if so instructed. The looting spread, destroying the infrastructure that had survived the war and creating the expectation of future chaos.’

When confronted with the plans for post-war Iraq before the invasion, Bush had been ‘relentlessly optimistic … he talked of an occupation that would resemble the American liberation of Germany and Japan. But both of those were well-defined nations before their conflict with the United States. Iraq is not – and could blow apart.’ With regard to the U.S. Army War College report, Conrad Crane notes that ‘if you expect that infrastructure will be relatively intact, the Iraqi Army will stay fairly cohesive to perform security duties, and the people will greet you with open arms and little persistent resistance, many of our requirements disappear or are considerably lessened.’ Yet, plans ought to have accounted for conservative rather than ideal assumptions. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Shalikashvili, put it recently, whatever planning for post-war Iraq the administration itself had done was based on ‘the most rosy predictions,’ not on bad or worst case scenarios. As the War College report forewarned: ‘The possibility of the United States winning the war and losing the peace in Iraq is real and serious. Rehabilitating Iraq will consequently be an important challenge that threatens to consume huge amounts of resources without guaranteed results.’

DID POSITIVE ILLUSIONS CONTRIBUTE TO WAR?

Before the war, Iraq and the U.S. were in a brinkmanship crisis that had been ongoing for a decade. What changed to result in war in 2003? First, the new Bush doctrine exerted its conviction to take greater risks than ever before to crush perceived foreign security threats. Deterring or containing Iraq was no longer seen as a viable option (its perceived failure during the 1990s, and the perceived imminence of threat, ruled that out). One contributing factor is that the U.S. over-estimated how easy regime change would be. Second, Saddam was overly confident that they would not try, or if they did, that they would fail. Such U.S. conviction and Iraqi incredulity predestined military action.

Regardless of one’s political stance on whether invasion was justified or not, several aspects of decision-making surrounding U.S. policy on Iraq betrayed positive illusions: At the pre-war phase (that their cause was just; WMD would be discovered; they could achieve their aims unilaterally; costs and obstacles of reconstruction would be low), during the war itself (that U.S. troops would be welcomed as liberators; Iraq would erupt in a spontaneous uprising against Saddam; war-time resistance would be limited) and, most significantly, during the postwar phase (that post-war resistance would be limited; Iraqi troops would be used for security and policing; Iraqi infrastructure would remain fairly intact; oil would pay for the reconstruction; Iraq would embrace democracy).

Bad information was part of the problem, but was not solely to blame for Administration policy. Senator Edward Kennedy cautioned that, ‘if we view these events simply as an intelligence failure – rather than a larger failure of decision-making and leadership – we will

92 Fallows 'Blind into Baghdad', p. 73.
93 Sanger 'A Stalwart of Certainty: Bush Undeterred on Iraq'
94 Conrad Crane, personal communication.
96 Crane and Terrill Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario, p. 42.
learn the wrong lessons … Specific warnings from the intelligence community were consistently ignored as the administration rushed toward war.97 Kenneth Pollack (an advocate of the war option), investigated what went wrong with intelligence and concluded that ‘at the very least we should recognize that the Administration’s rush to war was reckless even on the basis of what we thought we knew in March of 2003.’98 Positive illusions, though not expected for the reasons outlined at the beginning of this chapter, were a significant cause of the war: Of Saddam’s underestimate of the threat, and the U.S. underestimate of the costs and difficulty of the objective as a whole. Michael Elliott described these as: ‘A series of flawed assumptions and decisions made before the war started — some based on resolute optimism, some based on naivete, and some that carried unfortunate unintended consequences … bureaucratic infighting, wishful thinking, and … an undue influence in Washington exerted by Ahmed Chalabi … contributed to a process by which the Bush Administration got Iraq wrong.’99

Any positive illusions among individuals were likely to have been exacerbated within the fairly isolated Bush clique – all of whom needed to unite in the effort to defend a bold new National Security Strategy and Iraq policy against an often hostile civil service, Congress, public and world opinion. This is a classic groupthink environment. As I suggested in Chapter 1, positive illusions and groupthink biases are likely to exacerbate each other dramatically. Positive illusions can explain why assessments tend to be positively biased in the first place, and groupthink biases can explain why individuals that exhibit such illusions can seed a viscous circle within the decision-making group. According to Karen Alter, the Bush team’s pre-war foreign policy ‘manifested all the symptoms’ of groupthink that Irving Janis warned of:

‘Illusions of invulnerability leading to excessive optimism and the taking of extreme risks; Collective efforts to rationalize leading decision makers to discount warnings that might otherwise force them to reconsider; Stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate and too weak or stupid to counter an attack against them, leading to miscalculations; An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining group members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions; Advocates of the consensus view putting direct pressure on those who express strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members; Self-appointed mind guards emerging to protect the group from advice, information, and views that might shatter the shared complacency about the effectiveness or morality of their decisions; Self-censorship by people with views deviating from the apparent group consensus, creating an illusion of unanimity within the group.’100

Robert Jervis argues that there was also widespread ‘cognitive consistency’ in the debate on whether to invade. Those who thought military victory would be easy also tended to believe a slew of other interventionist ideas, even though each one is logically independent, such as that weapons of mass destruction would be discovered, that backing down would be disastrous, that a

99 Elliott 'So, What Went Wrong?', p. 32-33.
100 Alter, K.J. (21 September 2002) 'Is 'Groupthink' Driving Us to War?' The Boston Globe
secure, stable and democratic Iraq would be achievable. Those who thought that a military victory was not possible tended to believe all the opposite claims.\textsuperscript{101}

What would the administration say in their defense? The main official line has been to claim that, since everything is uncertain, outcomes cannot be surprising. Some things went badly, other things went well. Overall, Iraq will work out in the end. Rumsfeld in particular, who was ‘death to predictions,’ mused that ‘There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.’ Such embracing of the problem of uncertainty pervaded the pre-war and post-war debate on progress. However, Slavoj Zizek points out that Rumsfeld forgot the crucial fourth combination: ‘The unknown knowns, things we don’t know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the “knowledge which doesn’t know itself,” as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan used to say. In many ways, these unknown knowns, the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to, may pose an even greater threat. That is indeed the case with the reasons for this war.’\textsuperscript{102} Zizek’s argument is striking when one recalls that positive illusions may serve to exploit our own self-deception, filtering and predisposing incoming information to help us navigate through a more sinister world than we’d like to believe. If there was uncertainty, key decision-makers certainly seem to have interpreted the range of possible outcomes as being at the rosy end of the spectrum, rather than neutral or negative.

The press were sometimes to blame for widening the perceived mismatch between expectation and results, and ‘Rumsfeld quite reasonably complained about reporters’ seeming demand for instant success.’\textsuperscript{103} However, WMD aside, enough was known to make realistic predictions about what would happen in post-war Iraq – the U.S. government itself set up their own projects and commissioned reports specifically to assess them. The disastrous occupation is not just the result of a number of unlucky chance failures of policy, but from decision-makers maintaining overly optimistic expectations in the face of contradictory evidence:

‘The Pentagon did not properly assess and act on its intelligence reports. Coalition troops went prepared for chemical weapons and to do battle with Iraq’s Republican Guard; they were not told to expect determined, low-tech resistance from paramilitaries … How could coalition governments, with their superior intelligence gathering, have missed this information? It turns out they did not. Reports from several American intelligence sources warned that U.S. troops could expect just this kind of resistance. The only conclusion is that the Pentagon put this threat low on its list of priorities. It is clear now that coalition leaders misrepresented this war to the public. They sold it as a swift, clinical strike, relatively free of casualties. All laudable ideas, but patently unachievable.’\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{102} Zizek ‘Iraq's False Promises’, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{103} Entman Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{104} Editorial 'A War Like Any Other: Never Be Seduced by the Lure of High-Tech Weaponry'
Harmony with the theory of the book

The theory developed in this book helps to explain why positive illusions were allowed to become a causal factor promoting war in 2003. Two key predictor variables – regime type and openness of debate – were compromised to relax the constraints normally imposed upon assessments of risk. This was obvious for Saddam’s Iraq: He presided over a tyranny that killed the bearers of dissenting views, and a bureaucracy that eliminated open debate and diverse opinion. More surprisingly, the U.S. leadership also suffered from a low ebb in precisely the same variables: The democratic process was undermined in the decision for war, and debate was relatively closed to outside views. These claims are explained below.

First, Louis Fisher has described how the democratic process failed to exert the normal checks and balances on presidential power (such that the effective ‘regime type’ operating in Washington shifted away from democracy).\(^{105}\) Congress approved the Iraq war resolution not by consensus following a rigorous debate, nor even by making a firm decision. In the end, ‘the legislation would decide neither for nor against war. That judgment, which the Constitution places in Congress, would now be left in the hands of the President.’\(^{106}\) This predicament arose from a failure to adequately challenge administration policy and war aims, failure to adequately assess the intelligence information, political pressures due to upcoming mid-term elections and, ironically, a belief that giving war powers to the president would decrease the chance of war. This last factor was not only a belief among hawks – even French President Jacques Chirac held this view, and used it to convince the Syrians to vote in favour of the original UN resolution.\(^{107}\) It appears that this deficiency in the democratic process was perceived by the public as well. A \textit{New York Times} poll of 7 October 2002 asking ‘Is Congress asking enough questions about President Bush’s policy toward Iraq?’ found 51 percent of people said ‘no,’ and only 20 percent ‘yes.’\(^{108}\) The democratic process was hindered in no small part by those in power: ‘Only the Administration has access to all the information available to various agencies of the U.S. government – and withholding or downplaying some of that information for its own purposes is a betrayal of that responsibility.’\(^{109}\) According to Senator Kennedy, ‘Congress never would have voted to authorize the war if we had known the facts.’\(^{110}\)

Second, debate over the necessity for war (largely the WMD issue) and over the occupation, became relatively closed (such that the effective ‘openness of debate’ in Washington decreased).\(^{111}\) One problem was that UNSCOM inspectors, who left Iraq in December 1998, ‘had also been a moderating influence on Western intelligence agencies; the information they provided, and the mere fact of their presence in Iraq, helped those agencies stick to reasonable suppositions and keep unsubstantiated fears at bay. After 1998 many analysts increasingly entertained worst-case scenarios – scenarios that gradually became mainstream estimates.’\(^{112}\) There were much more serious problems in Washington. Rumsfeld and the Office of the Secretary of Defence (OSD) wilfully prevented full communication between the Pentagon and

\(^{105}\) Fisher ‘Deciding on War against Iraq: Institutional Failures’
\(^{107}\) Jervis ‘The Confrontation between Iraq and U.S.: Implications for the Theory and Practice of Deterrence’
\(^{111}\) Fisher ‘Deciding on War against Iraq: Institutional Failures’
other organisations planning and warning about the dangers of a post-war Iraq (for example, James Fallows reports that Pentagon officials were ‘forbidden’ by OSD to attend CIA exercises on post-war problems, and senior military personnel were excluded from meetings). More generally, the administration stuck to politically and psychologically motivated argumentation and intelligence sources. The administration’s official line foreclosed debates and preparations that, though they might have made the prospect of war less attractive, nevertheless could have resulted in a more effective peace. Former director of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Greg Thielmann, said that ‘some of the fault lies with the performance of the intelligence community, but most of it lies with the way senior officials misused the information they were provided … They surveyed the data, and picked out what they liked. The whole thing was bizarre. The secretary of defense had this huge Defense Intelligence Agency, and he went around it.’

The administration tended to seek, believe and propagate intelligence that served their purpose. Analysts often knew that such sources were unreliable, but were unable to maintain a balanced stream of information and instead faced time-consuming challenges to confirm their own challenges. Kenneth Pollack reports that many in the intelligence community witnessed that ‘Administration officials reacted strongly, negatively, and aggressively when presented with information or analysis that contradicted what they already believed about Iraq.’

The closing of debate should, in theory, have been counteracted by certain post holders in the administration, in particular the vice-president, Dick Cheney, and the national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice. They may have offered Bush too narrow a set of options and assessments of the risks: ‘the people supporting him did not really expose him to the decisions he should have had a chance to make.’ In fact, Bush’s ‘lack of curiosity about significant details may be his fatal weakness. When the decisions of the past eighteen months are assessed and judged, the Administration will be found wanting for its carelessness. Because of warnings it chose to ignore, it squandered American prestige, fortune, and lives.

Conclusions

Both of the above failings – of democratic process and of debate – are reminiscent of Vietnam: The Tonkin Gulf resolution of 1964 paralleled that the Iraq war resolution – a Congress hoping to avert war by handing over the power to wage it to the President. And, moreover, an ever-closing debate that failed to permit intelligence assessments to accurately update administration policy. If these were lessons of Vietnam, they were not fresh in decision-makers minds in 2003: ‘The resolutions are virtually identical in transferring to the president the sole decision to go to war and determine its scope and duration. In each case, lawmakers chose to trust in the president, not in themselves. Instead of acting as the people’s representatives and preserving the republican form of government, they gave the president unchecked power … Placing the power to initiate

113 Fallows 'Blind into Baghdad'
114 Cited in Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Speech To The Council On Foreign Relations, 5 February 2004
117 Fallows 'Blind into Baghdad', p. 74.
war in the hands of one person was precisely what the Framers hoped to avoid when they drafted the Constitution.\textsuperscript{118}

Conrad Crane noted that ‘a fair analysis of the war will have to explain why the assumptions about combat operations basically appear to have been correct (I suspect because of Iraqi ineptitude), while those for reconstruction were very wrong.’\textsuperscript{119} I propose that expected sources of variation in positive illusions may account for this. U.S. institutions and individuals had recent experience of war – not only in Iraq itself, but also fighting guerrilla forces in Somalia and Afghanistan (the Iraqis may have seen the Mogadishu fiasco as a model that could be repeated, whereas the Americans made efforts to avert similar scenarios). The U.S. did not, however, have recent experience of post-war occupation and democracy building in the Middle East (they did have some from Bosnia and Kosovo). As outlined in Chapter 2, positive illusions decrease with the level of relevant feedback. In war, the U.S. armed forces had recent and direct feedback. In occupations, they did not. For similar reasons, the verifiability and ambiguity of post-war tasks were more remote than those involved in the war itself, so we might expect the post-war tasks to yield less specific information that could puncture positive illusions.

In addition to this, it is also possible that positive illusions were generally widespread, but that they manifested themselves usefully in war and disastrously in occupation. As has been a theme of the book, positive illusions and over-confidence can bring both glory and havoc. In Iraq, the same U.S. optimism and confidence that led to decisive victory may also have led to the disasters of occupation. Positive illusions among soldiers and commanders may have contributed to military effectiveness, while positive illusions among Pentagon staff may have contributed to poor planning. As an example, Colonel David Perkins, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division’s 2nd Brigade, led ‘a campaign marked by bold manoeuvres and risk-taking’ and that included the two ‘Thunder Runs’ into Baghdad. These high speed armoured convoys blasted their way into the centre of Baghdad long before any significant force was ready to move in. This incredibly gutsy move may have stolen the victory before the battle for Baghdad had even begun. The idea was to send a simple message to the Iraqi resistance – that the U.S. could move as it pleased and seize key locations in the city, resistance would be useless. Colonel Perkins later noted that, ‘If you laid out a decision-making chart, it probably would have said, “You need to get out now” … Personally, I was just so adamant that we’ve got to be able to figure a way to stay in the city, that if we pull out now we will have done a lot of this for naught. It would just be turned on us as a giant loss, both tactically and strategically.’\textsuperscript{120} Ricks wrote that ‘the war, as defined by the U.S. military, was essentially won with this very small lightning strike into downtown Baghdad.’\textsuperscript{121}

The small, bold and manoeuvrable force that Rumsfeld so heavily advocated at the beginning, and that was epitomised by the ‘Thunder Runs’ at the end, may have sealed the military victory faster than a slower moving, ‘overwhelming force.’ Yet, that same philosophy of small, bold, manoeuvrable forces is precisely the reason – as much of the Army and others argued before the war – that postwar Iraq collapsed instantly into chaos, hardly to have recovered since. Therein lies the havoc. Fallow’s echoes this dichotomy:

‘As a military operation, the ousting of Saddam Hussein’s regime will be studied for years as a success, as a brilliant combination of movement, firepower, deception, speed,
unconventional tactics. This was a brilliant moment for the U.S. military. As a strategic
decision about how to deploy U.S. force, in the largest sense, I think the campaign as a
whole will be studied for its failures. The U.S. incurred foreseeable preventable errors
and mistakes in the weeks and months after that brilliant military campaign. So it was a
brilliant tactical success that was part of a strategic failure. The United States can still –
and must still – see its way through to some kind of successful outcome in Iraq. But the
task is much, much harder for the United States and for the Iraqis, because of the
preventable errors the United States made after the war.”

Despite a warranted confidence in achieving a military victory, there lurked an over-confidence
about the wider mission of regime change as a whole: How fast, how easily, how cheaply and
how cleanly. Such over-confidence among U.S. decision-makers – and subsequent planning
mistakes – appear to have originated from rosy starting assumptions (the most important of
which, appear to be that U.S. troops would be welcomed; resistance would fade quickly; that
former Iraqi soldiers could be used to provide security; and that oil would fund reconstruction).
Such faulty assumptions allowed the Administration to discount reports and recommendations
that did not share these assumptions as a foundation. ‘The President must have known that
however bright the scenarios, the reality of Iraq eighteen months after the war would affect his
re-election. The political risk was enormous and obvious. Administration officials must have
believed not only that the war was necessary but also that a successful occupation would not
require any more foresight than they gave it.”

‘I would have thought that the people who, number one, cared most about removing
Saddam Hussein and his threat, and number two, cared most about making Iraq an
democracy to the Arab Islamic world, would have been the most insistent on
taking the long view – on making sure the whole campaign was a success, not just the
military campaign to take over Baghdad… it is a mystery to me, even now … how those
same people could have been so indifferent about the postwar consequences in Iraq.’

Fallow’s suggests that the errors have something to do with the personality of Bush and
Rumsfeld, and partly ‘an attitude prevailing in the administration that over the decades, these
particular people had grown accustomed to thinking that they were likely to be right, and their
critics were likely to be wrong.”

The point of this final chapter is to suggest that positive illusions remain as important
today as they did in the Pleistocene (where they would have helped humans survive), to 1914,
1965 and 2003 (where they did not). In fact, the more our societies and technology distance us
from our evolutionary roots, the more we should expect our evolutionary legacy to lead us into
faulty temptation. There may even be aspects of modern war that make assessment of opponents

123 Fallows ‘Blind into Baghdad’, p. 74.
especially vulnerable to error. For example, Antony Beevor argues that in the past, there was a greater reliance and focus on ‘human intelligence’ – people with their eyes and ears on the ground. They tend to develop a good intuition for the state of the all important ‘hearts and minds’ – a wishy-washy notion that is nevertheless essential to the success of modern wars and their aftermath. Nowadays much of this has been replaced with remotely controlled satellite and signals intelligence. Beevor notes that the over-optimistic expectations of Shiite uprising in Iraq may have occurred largely because of a paucity of human intelligence information. When colonial forces were tackling similar problems in the Middle East and Central Asia in the 19th century, the British were much more reliant on human intelligence, and back then ‘nobody had any illusions about the unpredictability of regime change and its side-effects.’

At the larger scale of U.S. grand strategy (the Bush doctrine), the whole decision to fight at all – to create a precedent for unilateral, preemptive war and foster an entire state within the Middle East – may reflect positive illusions about U.S. ideological supremacy, its control over world events, and its future security. Each of these three dangers closely match expected forms of positive illusions in human psychology: Self-serving biases, illusions of control, and over-optimistic expectations about the future. As Robert Jervis warned, ‘the United States may be only the latest in a long line of countries that is unable to place sensible limits on its fears and aspirations.’

128 Jervis 'Understanding the Bush Doctrine' , p. 366.
Appendices

Appendix 1.1 Why Over-confidence Beats Accuracy

The evolutionary psychologist Daniel Nettle and his colleagues have shown that, where the outcomes of events are uncertain, actually over-estimating the probability of success can outperform perfect rationality.\(^1\) It is well worth following their argument through. The basic idea is that, although it is possible to be both under- or over-confident, the costs and benefits of these two errors are not symmetrical.\(^2\) Over-confidence can have a greater payoff than accuracy. Here is why:

Imagine you are faced with a game leading to success or failure. You can choose to play, for some benefit of success and some cost of failure, or choose not to play, gaining nothing and losing nothing. Opting out can be costly because, had you played and succeeded, you would have gained. The ideal strategy therefore would be to make sure you do always play if you will win, but that you do not play if you will fail. The problem is that the outcome is risky – there is only some probability that you will win. So to decide what to do one must weigh up the ‘expected utility’ of each choice (this is simply the net gain of each outcome multiplied by the probability that it will occur). If the benefits and costs are equal, then whenever the probability of success is greater than 50%, you should play.

However – and this is where it gets interesting – when the costs and benefits are not equal, the minimum probability of success required to make playing the better option rapidly declines (i.e. in a non-linear fashion) as the benefits continue to increase, so that it becomes nearly always worth playing even if the probability of success is only small. Figure A-1.1 illustrates this. For the sake of clarity in the subsequent discussion, let’s use the word ‘ante’ for

---


the cumbersome condition ‘the minimum probability of success required to make playing the better option.’ Put another way, the ante becomes disproportionately smaller as the benefits get bigger – i.e. you should go for the big benefit even if dicey. At the other extreme, the ante becomes disproportionately larger as the costs get bigger – i.e. you should play safe even if there is a reasonable chance of winning).

So how would an astute actor best deal with this situation? In a perfect world, a rational player would always know the true values of the benefits, costs and the probability of success. But knowledge is rarely perfect (because, for example, decisions are not precisely the same as any taken before) so one can never know the true probability of success. Under such uncertainty, even a rational agent will have to estimate that probability. This, of course, will include some degree of error – some mistake in his estimation. Now, because of this error component, even a rational agent’s decision will sometimes turn out to be a bit too high, and at other times a bit too low. Each decision will only be optimal if the estimated probability and the true probability are on the same side of the curve depicted in Figure A-1.1.

As long as benefits exceed costs, over-estimates of probability can never lead to sub-optimal behaviour, but under-estimates will do so: This is because if the chances were good enough to play on some true probability (say, a 20% chance of success), then the correct decision will also have been made even by an over-estimate anywhere above this value (e.g. wrongly guessing a 50% or 80% chance of success). By contrast, if the true probability is under-estimated, then the decision taken will have been the worse option.

The same logic applies on other side of curve – if the chances are not good enough to play, then any under-estimate ensures the optimal behaviour not to play. However, the non-linear curve in Figure A-1.1 shows that where benefits exceed costs, over-estimates are always desirable: The range of success probabilities across which over-estimates remain optimal is large, and as the benefit-cost ratio goes to infinity, over-estimation never matters for the whole of the probability range of 0 – 1. Without perfect knowledge, and providing the benefits are higher than the costs, we are better off over-estimating than under-estimating. This approximates common sense advice – if there are high risks for little gain, be cautious. But if you have little to lose, go for it.

All this leads to the conclusion that a player who over-estimates will do better than a rational agent who estimates the true probability. Why? The rational agent aims for the true probability plus some error, so some of his estimates fall below the true probability, others fall above – on average, half of all his choices would lead to wrong decision. But, if instead of aiming at the true probability (and losing out half the time), one was to systematically over-estimate the probability, then the error component is less likely to knock estimates below the true probability (such estimates will vary precisely as a rational agent’s would, but because the bulls-eye is shifted up a bit, even with the error, over-estimates are more likely to stay above that crucial curve). When benefits exceed costs – i.e. over most of the range of Figure A-1.1 – an actor with positive illusions never makes a wrong decision. So a rational actor is out-competed by an actor with a baseline positive bias.
Figure A-1.1. Why an optimistic bias can outperform rational choice. In a simple game, winning brings some benefit, losing incurs some cost. If one does not play, one gains and loses nothing. The curve describes the minimum probability of success required to make playing a better choice than not playing (the curve describes the break-even point between each option’s ‘expected utility’ – the probability of winning multiplied by the net gain). When there is uncertainty in the true value of the probability of success, a rational player’s estimate aims at the true value but will include some error – meaning half of the time he under-estimates and half the time he over-estimates. All will be wrong, but half will still make the optimal decision: When benefits exceed costs, over-estimation costs nothing – an over-estimate that one has an 80% chance of winning still means you play and win even if the true minimum probability required to play was only 20%. But under-estimation means not playing when one should have done, resulting in a loss of potential benefits. When costs exceed benefits, the reverse is true – it would be better to under-estimate. However, the fact that the relationship is non-linear means that as benefits become larger than costs, it rapidly becomes optimal to over-estimate rather than under-estimate. Hence, when benefits exceed costs, an optimistic bias outperforms an accurate estimate because it bumps up the perceived probability of success so that errors are less likely to result in the sub-optimal decision (re-drawn from Nettle, D. (In Press) ‘Adaptive Illusions: Optimism, Control and Human Rationality’ In Emotion, Evolution and Rationality, (Eds, Evans, D. and P. Cruse) Oxford University Press, Oxford).

In this graph, cost is fixed at 1. Therefore, above benefit = 1, benefits always exceed costs, so over-confidence pays off and, with some degree of error, outperforms rational estimates and under-confidence.
Nettle and his colleagues used a computer simulation to carry out a more in depth test of this optimistic advantage. Over hundreds of interactions, they found that the above logic holds: an optimistic bias can outperform a rational actor. The question is not whether positive illusions can be adaptive, it is when. Positive illusions outperform unbiased (‘rational’) assessments under the following conditions: When there is a fairly high uncertainty in the assessment of outcome probability, and fairly low uncertainty in the assessment of costs and benefits. This follows directly from the above. When uncertainty in success is very low, then of course it would be better to know the true probability – since there is little error that positive illusions would help to compensate for. But when uncertainty in success is high, it would be better to over-estimate.

The Nettle team argue that these conditions are highly plausible for human evolution. The costs and benefits accruing from most life events tend to be recurrent and can be learned by experience and observation. Indeed, if they were common enough in human history, their evaluation may have become innate (for example, the benefits of achieving higher social status). By contrast, success probability is not recurrent. It is much more difficult to learn, since it depends on numerous contingencies of time and context – and their interactions – such as unpredictable external factors and whether other people decide to compete for same goal. All such things are likely to alter success probability.

Empirically, people tend to give more weight to costs and benefits than to the probability of success (a strategy that does so is less likely to make errors as in Figure A-1.1). But it seems likely that positive illusions are sensitive and reactive to variation in costs and benefits, so that over-estimation is somewhat tempered when costs become too high. This also has empirical support – people’s positive illusions are moderated by feedback so that they are kept within reasonable bounds. However, because modern life is often unlike our environment of evolutionary adaptation, positive illusions may be less responsive than they should be and pervade even when costs are extremely high, or when they fail to be triggered by evolutionarily salient stimuli (e.g. cabling orders across continents to launch thousands of strangers into a fight).

These results strongly suggest that positive illusions are design features, not design flaws. Positive illusions outperform rational actors in plausible conditions. They might even have had further advantages in our evolution if they were cognitively faster (which could trump rational calculations in fast-occurring life or death situations), or cognitively cheaper to develop (which could trump rational calculations in the long run because the brain was a costly device for evolution to fashion). As Nettle concludes, ‘in behavioural decisions where the benefit of success much outweighs the cost of trying and failing, then, under uncertainty, it is adaptive to be optimistic about the chances of success.’

---


It is important to remember that an over-confident bias need not be better than an accurate estimation at all times for it to pay off in the long run. Evolution – or any other selection process – would favour biases that ‘historically minimized overall costs or maximized overall benefits.’ Having one’s bluff called every now and then can be better than never bluffing. So a natural over-optimism may ‘result from adaptive biases that exist in the present because they led to survival and reproductive advantages for humans in the past.’ This realisation has led to the development of ‘error management theory,’ which proposes that ‘psychological mechanisms are designed to be predictably biased when the costs of false-positive and false-negative errors were asymmetrical over evolutionary history.’ In such cases, the brain simply evolved to exploit the asymmetry, however odd that might seem in modern life.

---

6 See Hasleton and Buss ‘Error Management Theory: A New Perspective on Biases in Cross-Sex Mind Reading’, p. 90.
7 Ibid., p. 81, their italics.
Appendix 1.2 Alternative Origins of Over-confidence

In addition to positive illusions, there are a number of other sources of over-confidence, summarized in Table A-1.2. In principle, these can be distinguished from each other because they have unique predictions. However, none are mutually exclusive, so two or more may operate simultaneously. Each is outlined briefly below the table.

Table A-1.2. Potential origins of over-confidence ranging, in order, from purely conscious planning to more ‘hard-wired’ traits. For all origins, they may sometimes be useful (e.g. when they succeed in bluffing an opponent), sometimes not (e.g. when complacency incurs costs). Note that simple error does not fit into this scheme, because random errors would sometimes result in over-confidence and at other times result in under-confidence. This thesis is interested in systematic biases in the positive, over-confidence direction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Ability to control*</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Unique Prediction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conscious propaganda</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Individuals can deduce that they can defeat opponents by displaying over-confidence to increase resolve among one’s own side or to bluff the opponent (domestic or foreign propaganda targeted at home or at the enemy). Individuals may become increasingly confident as a result of recognising (or being taught to recognize) successes in past experience. This may come from deliberate reflection, or be subliminal.</td>
<td>Confidence differs in private versus public records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence reflects past experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious conviction</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Individuals have often proclaimed that God will ensure them victory. Whether or not this is possible, this has been a common conviction throughout history.</td>
<td>Confidence attributed to supernatural forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive biases</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Brain architecture and operation results in anchoring, framing biases, attribution error etc.</td>
<td>Varies with type of bias, but predictable responses dependent on, for e.g., the framing of an issue and type of information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated biases</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Emotional needs result in groupthink, cognitive consistency, denial, etc.</td>
<td>Varies with type of bias, but decisions are often rationalized in tell-tale ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive illusions</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Tendency to over-estimate one’s qualities and capabilities, exaggerate</td>
<td>Confidence reflects illusions of superiority, control and/or over-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality types</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>one’s ability to control events, and to have over-optimistic expectations of the future. Many personality traits affect behavior and some lead to over-confidence.</th>
<th>Confidence and reasoning differs from other individuals.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality disorders</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Specific pathologies can generate extreme over-confidence (e.g. delusions of grandeur).</td>
<td>Bearer can be diagnosed with specific symptoms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuro-chemistry</td>
<td>Zero (except with drugs)</td>
<td>Various hormones and other physiological processes alter behavior and confidence, especially in situations of stress and conflict.</td>
<td>Confidence correlates with physiological markers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* If we are interested in understanding and preventing war, then it is crucial to know whether a source of over-confidence can be compensated for by the actor, or by institutional design. For example, conscious propaganda can be toned down if it becomes detrimental to one’s cause, but personality types or psychological biases may persist despite visible negative consequences.

*Conscious strategizing* – Exaggerated confidence can be deliberately feigned to achieve some end. In international relations, an outward image of strong military capability is crucial to credible deterrence, for example. Negotiating positions, public support, crises, and wars can be significantly turned to one’s favour simply by what you say you will do, what you are seen preparing to do, and by the commitments you make. What you are realistically capable of may matter very little. On the other side of the coin, the penalties of signalling under-confidence can be severe as others will exploit weakness. For example, President Johnson was furious when his Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, openly expressed doubts about the bombing of North Vietnam to Senate hearings in 1967. Johnson worried that betraying the existence of even minor doubts in U.S. resolve would play into North Vietnamese hands and hugely increase Ho Chi Minh’s bargaining power.

*Learning* – Over-confidence can result from becoming too cocky on the basis of past victories. For example, Hitler’s confidence before World War II increased with each success. During 1938 and 1939 his ever more ambitious demands went effectively unopposed and paid off.

---

huge dividends (remilitarising the Rhineland, Anschluss with Austria, the seizure of Czechoslovakia). Psychologist Roy Baumeister cites a less well known example:

‘The nineteenth-century ruler Shaka used a ruthless realism to forge the Zulu empire, but his egotism appears to have expanded enormously with his successes. The excesses of the later part of his rule caused numerous and needless deaths and at several points nearly destroyed his entire population. Finally his supporters turned on him and assassinated him. The suggestion that power corrupts is hardly new. The point of the present argument is that one important mechanism for the self-destructive consequences of power is the expansion of illusions beyond the optimal margin.'

Even the great generals of history succumb to this weakness. Napoleon was defeated ‘not because he was professionally incompetent, but because he became politically over-confident. His successes led him to dysfunctional behaviours like delusions of grandeur, gambling, misperception, distrust of subordinates, and an excessive demand for efficiency that exhausted his troops and officers.’ In 1803, Napoleon even ordered medals to be struck in advance to commemorate a future French occupation of London! All that he had gained in his extraordinary adventures were eventually ‘negated by his boundless over-confidence.’ Sequential successes can engender increasing levels of confidence that may well be justified up to a point, but as power corrupts, increasing confidence can easily become over-confidence.

Religious Conviction – Religious conviction has inspired people throughout history to believe that their conquests or wars are righteous, that they will be victorious, that God will enable them fight better than their opponents, and that they will be rewarded even if they fail. As an extreme example, many Europeans believed that faith would permit the Children’s Crusade of 1212 (literally, thousands of mainly French and German children and poor people) to recapture Palestine from the Saracen armies. Religion has often not only inspired confidence in victory, but also in the superiority of ones’ own group over others. As Matt Ridley put it directly:

‘The universalism of the modern Christian message has tended to obscure an obvious fact about religious teaching – that it has almost always emphasised the difference between the in-group and the out-group: us versus them; Israeliite and Philistine; Jew and Gentile; saved and damned; believer and heathen; Arian and Athanasian; Catholic and Orthodox; Protestant and Catholic; Hindu and Muslim; Sunni and Shia. Religion teaches its adherents that they are a chosen race and their nearest rivals are benighted fools or even subhumans. There is nothing

---

14 Ibid., p. 123.
especially surprising in this, given the origins of most religions as beleaguered cults in tribally divided, violent societies.\textsuperscript{15}

**Personality Types and Personality disorders** – Variation in personality types may influence confidence.\textsuperscript{16} During the war in Vietnam, many authors have claimed that Johnson’s personality had much to do with his policy preferences. Some claim that ego and machismo played a role in his leadership, and that he even ‘saw the war as a test of his own manliness.’\textsuperscript{17} Extreme personality types, such as Hitler or Stalin are often diagnosed as having personality disorders, such as narcissism, psychopathic tendencies, mania or other psychological pathologies.\textsuperscript{18} A number of these disorders are likely to provoke extreme levels of over-confidence.

**Cognitive Biases** – The ‘cognitive revolution’ in psychology reflects thousands of studies showing that the way in which the brain works appears to delimit the way people are able to interpret information, and this results in numerous systematic biases. The pioneering work of Kahneman and Tversky showed that rational decisions are compromised by such things as the familiarity of terms and concepts, availability of information stored in the brain, ‘anchoring’ on prior information, and the framing of decisions.\textsuperscript{19} A number of these have the effect of encouraging over-confidence.\textsuperscript{20}

**Motivated Biases** – In dealing with conflicting, unpleasant or unfamiliar information, there are many psychological mechanisms that appear to warp incoming information to ‘protect’ us from things that are difficult to deal with.\textsuperscript{21} Commonly, new information is interpreted in biased ways to fit preconceived notions, or to rationalise an already preferred course of action. Examples are ‘groupthink,’ which describes the way in which hopes and desires are preserved and exacerbated by the self-reinforcing dynamics of small groups, and ‘denial,’ in which unwanted information is rejected or ignored out of hand to protect the mind from anxiety.\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps the most famous example of the latter is Stalin’s refusal to believe the Germans were about to invade Russia in 1941, despite ‘no less than ninety separate, unequivocal warnings of an impending attack.’\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{18} Bullock Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives.


\textsuperscript{21} See an overview in relation to politics in Jervis Perception and Misperception in International Politics.


Neurochemistry – There are numerous chemical triggers that directly alter behaviour and many of these influence people’s level of confidence. Alcohol, for example, can reduce inhibitions and promote boisterous behaviour, inflated self-assessment and violence.24 One of the most important that occurs naturally is testosterone. Testosterone has a marked effect on self-confidence, dominance behaviour, and confrontational dispositions, and surges of testosterone can exaggerate confidence even in inappropriate situations.25


Appendix 3.1: Antecedent Conditions on Positive Illusions (See also Chapter 3, Table 3.2)

**Verifiability: High versus Low Levels**

Positive illusions are not wild deviations from reality – people do not normally believe things that are patently incorrect. Rather, people tend to put an optimistic swing on things. Moreover, they are responsive to information. If one continues to receive feedback on performance in a certain task then positive illusions about that task will diminish. By contrast, assessments about which one never receives feedback will tend to result in large positive illusions. The extent to which the target of assessment is ‘verifiable’ will, therefore, affect the degree of positive illusions.

In war, this is likely to be a particularly important variable. Politicians, for example, rarely experience direct feedback about their policies, because failures can be attributed to numerous other factors, people and problems in the decision-making tree. This is especially the case with war. The decision to escalate conflict, or even to start an entire war, is to some extent uncoupled from any direct feedback on assessment. Disaster need not implicate the policy itself, only that for some reason it did not work out the way intended. By contrast, at the sharp end of policy, military decision-makers may be exposed to immediate risks contingent upon their own personal judgements (e.g. task failure, loss of equipment, casualties). In such circumstances commanders are likely to receive more direct feedback, and also to be better able to attribute that feedback to the consequences of specific decisions. One may therefore predict that positive illusions should tend to decrease from politicians, to locally placed decision-makers, to military personnel on the ground, because of the increasing verifiability of decisions that each role allows. In other words, the lower down a hierarchy one travels the less steps there are in the decision-making process from conception to execution, and therefore the greater the likelihood that feedback will be directly attributable to specific decisions. The prediction is that positive illusions decline with the increasing verifiability of policy outcomes.

**Generality: General versus Specific Attributes**

Positive Illusions are greater when they are formed at a general, rather than at a specific level. Assessments of some very general notion, such as one’s hobbies or future plans, will likely elicit positive illusions because people can (or will inadvertently) focus on things that generate little direct information to contradict their assessments. By contrast, assessments of more specific things, such as whether one can play the piano or not, cannot be exaggerated so easily because they are extremely specific – both the assessor and anyone else can confirm them. This is likely

---

26 Taylor, Collins, Skokan, *et al.* 'Maintaining Positive Illusions in the Face of Negative Information: Getting the Facts without Letting Them Get to You'.
to be relevant to the different levels of decision-making involved in war because high-level strategic decisions are often very general, involving a number of assessments that do not, or cannot, draw on detailed information about each aspect (such as having to second guess an opponents’ intentions). Indeed, the strategic level necessarily remains general because it is only by cutting out all the specific details that one can appreciate the wider picture. By contrast, at the lower levels of decision-making, day-to-day decisions necessarily involve more specific facts and figures, such as planning what resources would be needed to accomplish some local objective. Detailed facts about the area and personnel involved (and over a shorter time horizon) can also be gathered specifically for the task in hand. To sum up, the prediction is that positive illusions will be greater at the strategic level when broad, general attributes are being assessed that are difficult to validate.

Feedback: Beginning versus End of Period

Despite the overwhelming evidence that people tend to have positive biases, undue optimism is sometimes diminished after negative events, or when they see that other people are competing for the same goal, or trying to prevent them from achieving it. Shelly Taylor argues that ‘illusions are able to respond to and make use of negative information when appropriate, while still maintaining positive beliefs overall.’ Negative information may come from direct experience of the environment, or from other people. In addition, when the objective results of performance are known to be revealed at a certain point in the future, optimistic expectations diminish as the anticipated feedback looms (e.g. the date of exam results, or of graduating from college). In these cases, assessments start off optimistic, become more accurate, and then often even end up negative. This change occurs because gradually, assessments become more realistic due to accumulating information and an increasing concern for accountability (something like: ‘it is me that got us into this war, we’re losing it, and now I’m going to be made to pay for it’). As feedback becomes more imminent still, pessimistic concerns overtake accuracy, as one faces the possibility that expectations were too high and an incentive emerges to reduce expectations in order to avoid disappointment. This may be driven by increasing attention, anxiety, salience, or information processing, but anxiety seems to be the most important factor (it is known to have an


inverse relationship with optimism). Note that, if anxiety is low (due to excessive self-assurance, false information, drugs or alcohol), optimism will continue unabated.

All this suggests that over optimism should decline with time (at least, that is, in cases where feedback is accumulated or anticipated). However, there are four factors which may make this less likely to diminish the impact of positive illusions on war: First, before a war, there is no feedback, so initial assessments and the key decision to fight it lack any regulation. Second, if feedback is a long way in the future, ignored, or not perceived to be relevant, then optimistic predictions will prevail. Third, feedback in war may be qualitatively different from the topics in psychological experiments – all-or-nothing feedback is rarely expected at a particular moment (except perhaps anticipation of the general results of a specific event, such as the D-Day landings). Fourth, in experiments, the incremental downgrading of specific events (such as exam forecasts) was found to occur only in low self-esteem individuals, not those with high self-esteem. Thus, actors such as senior politicians and military leaders, who might be expected to have high self-esteem, may retain optimistic biases despite anticipated feedback. In fact, Roy Baumesiter reports that high self-esteem individuals actually tend to increase their positive illusions following task failure, despite the negative feedback. Although there are reasons why this form of variation may be dampened in war, therefore, positive illusions are nevertheless predicted to decline with the increasing imminence or build up of feedback over time.

Ambiguity: Ambiguous versus Clear Attributes

Positive illusions about self-assessments are exacerbated when the attribute people are assessing is ambiguous. In such cases, subjects tend to (a) create their own self-serving definitions and (b) use their own self-serving criteria and evidence to judge whether they are good at them or not. For example, when asked about leadership ability, each person may respond by judging their ability on the basis of leadership criteria and evidence that they know they do excel at (e.g. time management), while not at all considering aspects they are bad at (e.g. delegating tasks). Moreover, as well as the trend for people to focus on their own strengths, they are also disinclined to focus on the strengths of others.

Experiments by David Dunning and his colleagues at Cornell University showed that as traits become more ambiguous, self-assessments become more over-optimistic. By manipulating the freedom subjects had in choosing the criteria of evaluation, they showed that this variation in positive illusions was due to people using more idiosyncratic criteria. When forced to use other people’s criteria, subjects were less biased. Hence, the researchers suggest that ‘after considering and presumably defining ambiguous traits, subjects may have subsequently

33 Baumeister and Boden 'Aggression and the Self: High Self-Esteem, Low Selfcontrol, and Ego Threat'.
34 This may be either a cognitive bias due to differential availability of information, or a motivated bias. Weinstein, N.D. (1980) 'Unrealistic Optimism About Future Life Events' Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 39: 806-820; Weinstein and Lachendro 'Egocentricism as a Source of Unrealistic Optimism'.
 Appendices

provided percentile rankings that were accurate given their own idiosyncratic definitions. This conclusion appears to be reinforced by the fact that ‘when considering unambiguous traits, people exhibited hardly any self-serving pattern whatsoever. That is, once the criteria of judgment are clearly established, people have the ability to assess their own standing in relation to their peers accurately.’ The authors continue that:

‘under this analysis, the above average effect by itself fails to serve as clear evidence of bias and distortion in social judgment. In effect, when people consider their own definition, and perhaps the one most relevant to the daily tasks they face, they may be largely accurate. However, even if this is the case, we can still conjecture that the above average effects, and the self-serving use of trait ambiguity, may have alarming social costs. These costs occur when one individual considers his or her peculiar definition as the only one worthy of consideration and fails to recognize when other plausible definitions are relevant.’

Hence, it may largely be misunderstandings and narrow thinking that fuel our illusions of supremacy over others. While it becomes difficult to know whether people are really accurate or biased in their assessments of ability once their ‘idiosyncratic trait definitions’ are taken into consideration, it certainly remains the case that if ‘people fail to recognize when other definitions of ability are relevant for success and achievement, estimates of their future well-being will be exaggerated.’

Dunning also found that, when judging others (instead of oneself) people do not invent criteria favourably tailored to that other person, as they do for themselves (if they did, others would be perceived as above average). Instead, people seem to impose their own self-criteria on other people, meaning that others are perceived as worse than they should be. Thus, there is a double-whammy effect that reinforces perceptions of superiority: The same self-serving criteria embellish ourselves and disparage others.

In the complexity of war, the traits in question and the appropriate criteria of judgment are likely to be especially ambiguous, and all the more so because rival opponents have incentives to conceal them from each other. Like the Hindu parable about the blind men each describing an elephant (a ‘snake,’ a ‘tree,’ a ‘broom,’ a wall’), even experts are likely to disagree on relative capabilities because they will, subjectively, give more or less weight to different factors in making up an overall assessment. Michael Handel suggests that while ‘a military leader with a strong personality can “convince” all those around him to support his plans despite unambiguous

---

36 Ibid., p. 1089.
37 Ibid., p. 1089.
38 Ibid., p. 1089.
evidence to the contrary,’42 this is \textit{even more likely} in political decision-making at the strategic level because: ‘What holds true for a strong-willed military leader is even easier for a political leader, who often deals with an adversary’s [more ambiguous] intentions and long-range policies rather than with air photographs, tank and troop concentrations and other “hard” evidence.’ The prediction is that positive illusions increase with the increasing ambiguity of the thing being assessed.

\textit{Stage of Task: Deliberation versus Implementation}

Taylor and Gollwitzer showed experimentally that, when people are in the act of \textit{setting} goals, positive illusions are dampened (allowing one to set more feasible objectives). In contrast, when \textit{planning} or \textit{implementing} goals, positive illusions are exacerbated (which under normal circumstances allows more effective action).43 This was only a relative change in positive illusions: Even subjects setting goals – and control groups in which neither mindset was elicited – exhibited positively biased self-perceptions, illusions of control, and perceived invulnerability to risk. Thus, ‘although positive illusions appear to fade in response to conditions that foster deliberation, they do not disappear altogether.’44 Still, when deliberating unresolved problems people seem more likely to consider pros and cons in an even-handed way.

However, ‘as soon as deliberation is focused on intended projects, even-handedness no longer occurs.’45 People in the implementation stage of a task do not motivate themselves to find clarity, were distracted by irrelevant thoughts, reflected less on pros and cons (they preferentially considered pros when they did), and tuned in exclusively on issues of getting the task done. Among groups still waiting to get started on implementing plans, \textit{and} groups already underway, there was a strong resistance to go back and deliberate decisions that had already been made, even when deliberation was explicitly encouraged. Thus, ‘implementation of a course of action appears to be a time when positive illusions are mustered, even exaggerated, in service of an explicit goal.’

The most drastic difference was in subjects’ perceived invulnerability to risk. Although this did not differ between the deliberation and control groups (i.e. deliberation did not \textit{reduce} this type of positive illusion), it was very strongly \textit{exaggerated} in the implementation groups, suggesting that ‘implementation may especially blind people to risk.’46

Such variation in positive illusions between different stages of a task suggests that they are selectively engaged when they are most useful:

‘Whereas predecisional people try to solve the task of choosing goals that are feasible and desirable, at the postdecisional phase, people attempt to implement the chosen goals

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., p. 220.
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., p. 223.
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., p. 220. They continue: ‘Such perceptions may be adaptive in helping people to further the goals they have chosen to implement by keeping them from being sidetracked or concerned about potential risks.’
\end{thebibliography}
Appendices

(intended projects) as efficiently as possible. By becoming involved with these different types of tasks, people are expected to develop distinct cognitive orientations or mindsets that help solve the respective task at hand … the vacillation of the predecisional phase is replaced by determination in the postdecisional phase. ⁴⁷

Thus, windows of more realistic thinking do occur, when ‘feedback is used to determine courses of action at choice points, but awareness of and implications of the feedback may dim, once a course of actions has been selected and is being or about to be implemented.’ ⁴⁸ The danger of this is that ‘people who turn an unresolved problem into an unintended project by making a decision may close their minds to this window, as postdecisional individuals do not possess easy access to impartial deliberative thinking.’ ⁴⁹ Only considering a limited number of options and then prematurely selecting one of them may make for disastrous cognitive closure. This has been argued to occur in a number of foreign policy decisions. ⁵⁰ Follow up experiments have shown that deliberative versus implemental thinking influences behaviour as well as cognition, and those in an implemental mindset outperform those in a deliberative one. Optimistic biases in implementation ‘appear to act as an insurance policy that goals will be aggressively pursued once deliberation is over.’ ⁵¹

Taylor and Gollwitzer’s experiments further suggest a number of novel manifestations of positive illusions, highly relevant to international relations, that may be provoked by an implemental mindset:

‘people may overestimate the affordances of the environment, the likelihood that other people will help them, and the likelihood that certain resources will be plentiful or available during implementation relative to deliberation. Implementation may also induce a form of tunnel vision, such that people think about their likely success and likely timetable of completion without reference to impediments that are likely to arise.’ ⁵²

To sum up, positive illusions are likely to be significantly amplified in wars that are already decided upon. However, this source of variation may not easily dampen positive illusions in deliberating whether or not to fight either, because the mindset of implementation may arise even before this decision is made. While there is some indication that the effect generalizes across situations, it is difficult to judge whether foreign policy, specifically, is deliberative or implemental. This may seem an odd statement, but if U.S. national interest is, say, the pursuit of

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 220-221.
⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 224. Other conditions, in addition to deliberation, may offer a similar window of realism. This may occur during illness, depression, sadness, frustration, poor mood, stress, or when experiencing loss, all of which are states in which people experience enhanced realism.
⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 220.
⁵² Taylor and Gollwitzer 'The Effects of Mindset on Positive Illusions', p. 225.
security and prosperity, then this may already represent an implicit goal – all subsequent foreign policy decisions may more closely represent implementation (i.e. planning how to achieve it, and getting on with achieving it). Whether each step in achieving this goal poses a fresh deliberative task, rather than continued implementation, is unclear. As a specific example, once the U.S. was committed to preventing communism in South-East Asia during the Cold War, the question then became, how? Eisenhower may have deliberated over whether or not to invest the initial support for the war in Vietnam, but Johnson’s decisions about whether to escalate were, perhaps, more of an implementation problem – he had to carry out with the predefined task of fighting and winning it. America was already heavily committed politically, and the goal already well established. This could help to explain Eisenhower’s relative reluctance to commit, and Johnson’s massive escalations once committed. Nevertheless, the prediction is that positive illusions increase significantly from the deliberation stage, to the planning and implementation stage of a task.

**Threat Level: Danger versus No Danger**

While positive illusions are common even in non-threatening times, they are more likely to be engaged, and to become extreme, in threatening circumstances. For example, positive illusions are widespread among people with life-threatening illnesses, and this was the original impetus for Shelley Taylor’s pioneering work on positive illusions. As Daniel Goleman wrote, ‘we seem most likely to fall back on our illusions in the face of an overwhelming threat, in situations in which we feel powerless to make a difference.’

More specific to conflict, Richard Wrangham argues that when there is a threat of violence, and during fighting itself, positive illusions may be triggered or amplified as an adaptive response (and may therefore have a tendency to exacerbate crises and wars as one goes into them). Roy Baumeister suggests that it is specifically times of threat to overly inflated self-perceptions in which aggression is triggered. Finally, Lawrence LeShan details how societies switch from realistic perceptions to self-serving misperceptions in times of war: When a nation is threatened, people devalue adversaries, attribute them with having evil intentions, band together and claim higher morals and virtues.

Despite these predicted increases in positive illusions when facing a threat, this does not mean that positive illusions become ever more unrealistic as the threat becomes larger: ‘Highly threatening but probable events are recognised for what they are, namely probable threats, and their likelihood, though distorted in falsely optimistic manner, is nonetheless perceived realistically relative to less probable threats.’

Positive illusions are different, therefore, from defensive psychological mechanism such as denial or repression, which increase in defiance of an increasing threat. To sum up, positive illusions are predicted to increase in times of threat.

---


Appendix 3.2: Antecedent Conditions on Over-confidence (See also Chapter 3, Table 3.3)

Regime Type

The translation of over-confidence into policy is predicted to vary with the actor’s regime type (I classify regime type as ‘democratic’ or ‘non-democratic,’ defined as governments that took power with or without a free vote). In modern democracies, public, media, parliamentary and cabinet scrutiny should more easily detect, oppose and prevent poor or biased assessment by the leadership (assuming, of course, that not everyone is subject to identical illusions, which is likely given the sources of variation discussed in Appendix 3.1, and the fact that information, prior experiences and opinions vary infinitely among individuals). By comparison, a tyrant’s beliefs and wishes can be translated into policy largely unchallenged. Indeed, many of his senior aides and military commanders are likely to have been appointed nepotistically (as favoured individuals or relatives), who lack incentives or even any difference of opinion to question or oppose their benefactor’s judgement. Furthermore, over-confidence in the leadership is less likely to be contested within tyrannies than in democracies because propaganda is less challenged by feedback from rival sources, which may be scarce or even censored. If it is contested, the perpetrators may be punished.\footnote{Meier, N.C. (1943) \textit{Military Psychology} Harper, New York & London.}

The prediction is that over-confidence is more easily dispelled in democracies. The U.S. government \textit{ought} to be particularly good at blocking unfounded confidence because of its specific design to maximize checks and balances and to encourage a divided government.\footnote{During the 20$^{th}$ century, the U.S. government has become increasingly often split between a democratic administration and republican congress, or vice versa. See Kernell, S. (1998) \textit{Going Public: New Strategies for Presidential Leadership} CQ Press, Washington.}

Openness of Debate

The translation of over-confidence into policy is also predicted to vary with the openness of debate (I classify openness of debate as ‘open’ or ‘closed,’ defined as the degree to which leaders encourage diverse and non-partisan opinions, consider multiple options, exploit intelligence analysis, stimulate further intelligence gathering, cooperate with intelligence services, and heed advice).\footnote{This variable presupposes that relevant information is actually available – it focuses instead on the subsequent use of this information. The information itself will never be comprehensive or perfect (nor precisely equivalent among cases), and there are significant problems in measuring the overall quality of information in a crisis or war. Nevertheless, different decision-making units can be classified roughly by how open they are with respect to dealing with information (at least relative to each other, if not in absolute terms).} Information is useless if it is false, irrelevant, misunderstood, or ignored.\footnote{Handel (Ed.) \textit{Leaders and Intelligence}.} Thus, the way in which information and advisors are \textit{used} is at least as important, if not much more so, than the intelligence \textit{per se} on which decisions are based. As Paul Kowert wrote:

\footnote{Handel (Ed.) \textit{Leaders and Intelligence}.}
leaders might consult their potential adversaries only to marshal their support (or defuse their opposition) rather than to discover the reasons for their opposition. Merely acquiring knowledge, therefore, does not in itself constitute proof of learning. One must also ask whether leaders use this information to reassess their policy options, even when doing so might challenge cherished assumptions about the world.’

More open debate should better scrutinise, provide alternative options, and uncover weaknesses of biased assessment by the leadership. By comparison, a more closed debate is likely to consider only limited options, to be unlikely to challenge the efficacy or judgement of chosen policy, and to ignore or fail to seek outside advice. Openness of debate can be independent of regime type, since even tyrants may have a very effective decision-making processes, advisors, and treatment of intelligence. However, as Ernest May pointed out in his classification of ‘collegial’ (more open) versus ‘centralized’ (more closed) decision-making groups, in the latter, strategic assessment ‘is at the mercy of the person in control.’ The prediction is that over-confidence is more easily dispelled where decision-making is inclusive (open and non-partisan) and expansive (many options and viewpoints are considered).

Classification of Cases by Regime Type and Openness of Debate

The classification of regime type is simple (democratic versus non-democratic leaderships). The classification of openness of debate is more complex, but it is important to remember that it is only the relative openness of debate among cases that matters for the test. Here is a brief rationale for each. For World War I: The states of the Triple Entente, though imperfect, had a more open decision-making process that those of the Central Powers. Munich Crisis: The Allied states had open and inclusive decision-making, whereas Hitler’s is well documented to have been exclusive. Cuban Missile Crisis: Soviet decision-making was closed, and especially so in the decisions to install nuclear missiles in Cuba. By contrast, Kennedy’s decision-making group was regarded as being excellent. Vietnam: U.S. decision-making varied among presidencies, but is generally agreed to have been less than perfect (perhaps best with Eisenhower and worst with

---


63 May Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars ; Handel (Ed.) Leaders and Intelligence.

The debate among North Vietnamese decision-makers was certainly selective and exclusive, but is not well documented.

Appendix 3.3: Case Study Selection

Why Use Case Studies?

I use a case study approach in which positive illusions can be directly examined in the context of (and therefore controlling for) the many other complex factors unique to each case. It also permits within-case analysis to identify causal processes against the uniform background conditions of each case, which is not possible with statistical correlations among multiple cases. This also allows greater ability to reject the possibility that the independent and dependent variables simply co-vary with some uncontrolled third variable, rather than affecting each other directly. Case studies permit more precise predictions as well (which are therefore stronger and more unique to the theory), based on specific aspects of the decision-making process which can then be examined in detail. Finally, case studies offer the opportunity to ‘process trace’ the precise chain of events to understand how the causal process operates (from the independent variable, to the intervening variable, to the dependent variable, while simultaneously examining the antecedent conditions and other factors, such as domestic politics, electoral concerns, etc.).

My previous study of positive illusions in data on battles highlighted particular problems with statistical measures of relative strengths and expectations of conflict outcomes because they rely on identifying subjective beliefs, and therefore concluded that better tests would have to come from identifying beliefs using the more detailed case study approach. Stephen Van Evera argues, in addition, that ‘most theories of war are best tested by case-study methods because the international historical record of prewar politics and diplomacy, which serves as our data, usually lends itself better to deep study of a few cases than to exploration of many cases.’

Case Study Selection Criteria

I deliberately selected cases for which the variable under test – positive illusions – should not be expected to have any effect. Consequently, finding an effect even in such unlikely circumstances represents the best kind of evidence because it provides a ‘hyper-strong’ test in which countervailing forces are present that counteract its predicted action. Such difficult-to-pass tests mean that there is an increased likelihood that predictions – and the theory – are falsely rejected, but the important point is that a positive result would suggest the theory is especially important given that it still had an impact in spite of apparently overwhelming factors stacked.

---

against it. In addition, all of the wars and crises I study have well established existing explanations (though not necessarily with a consensus among them), further reducing any expected effect of new factors.

My method therefore consists of two separate but reinforcing selection criteria: First, cases where the hypothesised effect is unlikely to occur; and second, cases where the hypothesised effect is apparently not needed because are good existing explanations for the events in question. This combination means that such cases provide particularly tough challenges to a novel hypothesis. Following these criteria, I chose major cases of wars and crises in 20th century history in which positive illusions were unlikely to be important, and for which compelling alternative explanations already exist (the justifications for these claims are explained in each case study).

This thesis takes on what Imre Lakatos called a ‘two-cornered fight’ – a test of my novel hypothesis against the ‘null hypothesis’ that there is no causal relationship. However, in each case, I go beyond simply eliminating the null hypothesis in a ‘multi-cornered fight’ to test whether my theory offers additional explanatory power over and above the dominant existing explanations for each case.

I also selected cases on the basis of: Data richness; extreme values of the dependent variable (i.e. crises that led to war and crises that led to peace); extreme values of antecedent conditions (i.e. widely different regime types and openness of debate); large within-case variance among the study variables (permitting multiple observations, within similar conditions, of whether variables of interest were related to each other as predicted); and an intentional focus in two cases on the U.S. administration, given the significance current U.S. foreign policy and military engagement around the globe. Finally, I selected for cases that represent key turning points in 20th century history, which are therefore key proving grounds for the novel hypothesis of positive illusions.

---


Appendix 3.4: Testing the Positive Illusions Hypothesis

All four case studies allow tests of predictions of the main hypotheses, of the explanatory hypotheses and of antecedent conditions. To clarify the methods I was able to use to test each type of prediction in my analysis, I set them out in Table A-3.4 and describe them below (refer to Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3 to see how each test examines different parts of the model). My analysis makes use of all three main case study methods (controlled comparisons, congruence analysis, and process tracing). Combining them is better than limiting the analysis to one method, since each has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Controlled Comparison

The ‘method of difference’ compares cases with similar general characteristics but different variable values to look for correlations between positive illusions and war (e.g. where the U.S. was a constant actor across cases, but the outcome – war/peace – was different). The ‘method of agreement’ is similar, but compares cases with different general characteristics and the same variable values (e.g. where the country varied among cases, but the outcome – war or peace in all cases – was the same). I also conducted these paired comparisons using opposing sides of the same war or crisis (in which each side again has different general characteristics but the outcome is the same).

Congruence Analysis

‘Type 1 congruence analysis’ compares values of the study variables to a base-rate. In my study, the base-rate is that of no war (i.e. peace). I then test whether a high value of the dependent variable, war (i.e. above the base-rate), is associated with a high value of the independent variable, positive illusions (i.e., are they also above the norm?). Congruence analysis and controlled comparisons are similar in that they both use multiple cases to minimise the possibility that a third variable is responsible for driving the results. The former does it by controlling for background conditions, the latter by using extreme variable values to increase the power that a third variable would need to have to achieve the same result.

‘Type 2 congruence analysis’ is similar except that it focuses on within-case variation. One tests whether the independent and dependent variables co-vary across different circumstances within the same case. I am able to do this in all cases to some extent, but especially in the case of Germany during 1938 to 1939 and the U.S. during the Vietnam War. Vietnam offers an unusual opportunity to examine five different U.S. administrations that each dealt with the same war. While many conditions are held constant during this time, the dependent variable changes in terms of escalation or de-escalation of the war. In addition, while regime type does not

---

72 George 'Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured Focused Comparison'; Eckstein 'Case Study and Theory in Political Science'; Van Evera Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science; Ragin The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies; and Tilly Big Structures, Large Processes, Hugh Comparisons.
change, openness of debate does. This method works best if there are many observations of the study variables (such that there is more data and the overall test is stronger), and if the variables vary sharply across time (such that predictions are stronger and more unique). A major advantage of this method is that measurement error, or the confounding effect of some third variable, are both unlikely since they would each have to vary exactly in synchrony with variation in the study variables to affect the results.

**Process Tracing**

This method traces the precise chain of events in the decision-making process leading from the initial conditions to the outcome. It fully exploits the case study approach’s advantage of using detailed written and oral testimony by decision-makers and actors both at the time and in retrospect. This method provides exact links between cause and effect so, while they may always be open to interpretation, in principle the predictions are strong and unique. The case studies in this thesis are not intended, however, to offer a comprehensive historical account of each crisis or war. Rather, I utilise the works of historians and political scientists, and primary documents where possible, to focus on those aspects relevant to the theory under test.

**Testing Antecedent Conditions**

Where possible in the case studies, I also test predictions of the antecedent conditions for positive illusions, and the antecedent conditions for over-confidence (see Figure 3.1). This is important in order to determine whether these variables operate in the way expected by the theory.

**Antecedent Conditions of Positive Illusions**

To formally examine the influence of all six antecedent conditions on positive illusions (verifiability, generality, feedback, ambiguity, stage of task, threat level), is not the central focus of this analysis. While those sources of variation are important, much more important is how, over and above any initial levels of positive illusions, regime type and openness of debate filter out the manifestations of over-confidence caused by positive illusions to prevent them influencing decision-making and policy outcomes. However, wherever possible I use congruence analysis logic (both among and within-cases) to determine whether high levels of positive illusions co-vary with high levels of these six antecedent conditions. Each should increase the effect of the independent variable (positive illusions) on the intervening variable (over-confidence) and thus on the dependent variable (war). I also exploit process tracing here because antecedent conditions can provide direct evidence of what factors cause the study variables to co-vary.

**Antecedent Conditions of Over-Confidence**

To examine whether regime type and openness of debate can explain variance in when over-confidence contributes to war, I conduct a controlled comparison of cases to compare each of these two antecedent conditions with outcomes of war versus peace. I also use congruence
analysis to assess whether, overall, extreme cases of each variable exacerbate over-confidence and war. I can also examine this *within* cases to test whether variation in regime type and openness, despite perhaps no variation in the underlying level of over-confidence itself, varies with changes in the dependent variable (i.e. escalation, or changes from peace to war). As above, process tracing also serves as an additional method to identify whether antecedent conditions cause the study variables to co-vary in the way predicted by the theory.
Table A-3.4 Predictions tested in the analysis of the case studies, using the methods of controlled comparison, congruence analysis and process tracing. Not all cases or all data are appropriate and/or available for each type of test, so the cases used by each method. Details of how these methods are carried out are found in the text above (i.e. the predictions are found in Tables 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and in Appendices 3.1 and 3.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Part of Theory Tested</th>
<th>Parts of Cases Used</th>
<th>Ca: (co-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Controlled Comparisons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Method of difference</td>
<td>Prime Hypothesis</td>
<td>Same state (U.S.), different outcome (war or peace)</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antecedent conditions (for over-confidence)</td>
<td>Same regime type, different outcome (war or peace)</td>
<td>D1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Same openness, different outcome (war or peace)</td>
<td>D2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Method of agreement</td>
<td>Prime Hypothesis</td>
<td>Different states (among cases), same outcome (war or peace)</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antecedent conditions (for over-confidence)</td>
<td>Different regime type, same outcome (war or peace)</td>
<td>D1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Different openness, same outcome (war or peace)</td>
<td>D2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Congruence Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) Comparison to the ‘norm’ (defined as no war, i.e. peace)</th>
<th>Prime Hypothesis</th>
<th>All cases</th>
<th>A1-A3, B1-B4</th>
<th>Co high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent conditions (for over-confidence)</td>
<td>All cases</td>
<td>D1, D2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Req over-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Hypothesis</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>A1-A3, B1-B4</td>
<td>Cor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Hypothesis</td>
<td>Germany (Munich to 1939)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent conditions (for over-confidence)</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>D2</td>
<td>Mori</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent conditions (for over-confidence)</td>
<td>Germany (Munich to 1939)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Process Tracing</td>
<td>Prime Hypothesis</td>
<td>All cases</td>
<td>A1-A3, B1-B4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent conditions (for over-confidence and positive illusions)</td>
<td>All cases</td>
<td>C1-C6, D1, D2</td>
<td></td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices

Appendix 8.1: Testosterone and Positive Illusions

Testosterone has long been known to correspond with human behaviour. James Dabb’s laboratory at Georgia State University has conducted many years of research on the relationship between testosterone and human behaviour. ‘Throughout these findings,’ she writes, ‘there is a theme, which appears also in animal studies, that testosterone contributes to boldness and focus of attention, both of which can be useful in agonistic one-on-one encounters.’ There are group effects as well – high testosterone groups are more rambunctious, wild and unruly. More importantly for this thesis, however, testosterone has been suggested to be a specific biological mechanism that engenders positive illusions.

In dominance hierarchies, testosterone is related to status. High-ranking individuals tend to have high testosterone levels, low status individuals to have low levels. Rank is known to correlate with physical characteristics, such as body size. It might seem, therefore, that body size itself should be a good method of assessing relative strength and who is more likely to win a contest. This would permit individuals to make accurate, ‘rational’ assessments about whom they should challenge in order to improve their status. Yet the reality is not so simple. Experiments show that, if low status individuals are injected with extra testosterone, they become more aggressive, challenge higher-ranking members of the hierarchy and are even able to defeat physically superior individuals. This is striking because in such a case the superior individual conceded to a physically weaker rival.

The capacity and willingness to challenge therefore appears to be connected to levels of testosterone, in addition to actual physical prowess. This implies that testosterone works by stimulating a degree of exaggerated confidence in brain processing, perhaps via some kind of cognitive self-deception, which is the trigger that facilitates an undaunted attack on an equal or superior individual. Testosterone may therefore aid the pursuit of status by overriding negative assessments of opponent strengths, even if those negative assessments are accurate. Various lines of evidence suggest that steroids do not necessarily make people more aggressive – a suspected but contradictory finding in studies – but they certainly do seem to make people more likely to respond to challenges, and to do so more confidently when they do (especially in men, who in contrast to women not only have higher levels of testosterone but also have rapid surges of testosterone from the testes in response to stimuli). This may explain why testosterone sometimes seems to be linked to aggression and sometimes not (it would depend on the type of challenge). As Richard Wrangham writes: ‘An important link between testosterone and aggression may be through the hormone’s impact on self-assessment. If testosterone indeed promotes self-confidence rather than aggressiveness, the unpredictability of “roid rage” will be

---

76 Mazur and Booth ‘Testosterone and Dominance in Men’.
more understandable." Given that testosterone levels are heritable, one can easily imagine that evolution might have selected for high and/or reactive levels of this hormone if it aided performance in confrontations and conflict.

Research on testosterone in humans conforms to findings in other species. Research on fights among elephants, for example, reveals that when they are in mating condition ('musth'), male elephants have testosterone levels 50 times higher than usual. Relative fighting ability is not a satisfactory explanation for who wins because, although there is normally a clear correlation between dominance rank and body size, small musth males can dominate larger and higher-ranking males that are not in musth. When two male bulls of equal size meet, 'the elephant that holds his head higher, whether because he is bigger or more confident, usually wins.' Musth matters more than strength. Hence, the direct effect of neurochemistry can mean that, sometimes, small guys finish first.

Testosterone might be thought only to influence people directly involved in some kind of confrontation. Not so. While testosterone increases in both physical and mental challenges (including in games of chess, for example), it remains high before and during a challenge, but it only remains high afterwards if you win. This is the so-called 'Victory Effect.' A study of football fans in the 1986 World Cup final between Brazil and Italy found that while both sides had high testosterone levels before a match, after the match only the fans of the winning side (Brazil) had high testosterone. Italian fans actually had lower than normal testosterone levels. What is more, these fans were not even present at the event. They were watching the match on TV in sports bars in Atlanta. Thus, testosterone changes the behaviour not only of those actually involved in events, but also those with a vested interest in them. It is quite likely therefore that decision-makers and leaders have testosterone surges during crises (not only are they dealing with the mental challenge of decision and – perhaps – the physical challenge of stress, they have a vested interest in the performance of their pilots or army). Obviously, data on this does not exist, but it remains probable that testosterone influences all actors in an international confrontation, whether one is firing a gun on the battlefield or cabling orders from five thousand miles away.

---

78 Wrangham The Cooking Ape.
control ‘either in combative interpersonal encounters (as among violent criminals or trial lawyers) or on the larger public scene (as among actors or politicians).’\textsuperscript{84} Certainly, it would be wasteful to ignore our knowledge of its effects.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{84} Dabbs 'Testosterone Measurements in Clinical and Social Psychology', p. 302.
Bibliography


Alter, K.J. (21 September 2002) Is 'Groupthink' Driving Us to War? *The Boston Globe*


Baumhart, R. (1968) *An Honest Profit* Prentice-Hall, New York


Brooks, R.A. (In preparation) Military Institutions, Strategic Assessment and War

Brooks, R.A. (In press) Military Institutions, Strategic Assessment and War


Bibliography


Chesterton, G.K. (1908) *All Things Considered*


250
Cross, P. (1977) Not Can but Will College Teaching Be Improved *New Directions for Higher Education* 17: 1-15


Bibliography


Editorial (2003) A War Like Any Other: Never Be Seduced by the Lure of High-Tech Weaponry. New Scientist, 5 April


Gibbs, N. and M. Ware (2003) Chasing a Mirage *Time*, 6 October


Haas, M.L. (2001) Prospect Theory and the Cuban Missile Crisis *International Studies Quarterly* 241-270


Bibliography


255
Bibliography


Keegan, J. (2003) This Is Not Vietnam - the Allies Are Well on the Way to Victory The Daily Telegraph, 1 April


Kher, U. (2003) 3 Flawed Assumptions About Postwar Iraq Time, 22 September


Bibliography


Kissinger, H.A. (1979) White House Years Little Brown, Boston


Klar, Y., D. Zakay and K. Sharvit (In Press) "If I Don't Get Blown up…": Realism in Face of Terrorism in an Israeli Nationwide Sample Risk, Decision and Policy


Lebow, R.N. (1990) Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis *Diplomatic History* 14: 471-492


Mannarelli, T. (In preparation) Motivation, Individuation, and Positive Illusions of Creative Musicians


Markham, C.R. (1872) *Reports of the Discovery of Peru* Printed for The Hakluyt Society, London


PBS ‘Frontline’ Documentary Interviews (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/)


Reid, T. (2003) Rumsfeld Shows Strain as He Comes in the Line of Fire *The Times (London)*, 29 March


Bibliography


Unattributed (2003) Iraq: Failure Begins to Look Possible The Economist, 1 November


265
Van Evera, S. (Forthcoming)
Vasquez, J.A. (Ed.) (2000) *What Do We Know About War?* Rowan & Littlefield, Lanham, MD
von Clausewitz, C. (1997/1832) *On War* Wordsworth Classics, Ware, UK

266

