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Rage of Honor: Entente Indignation and the Lost Chance for Peace in the First World War

ALEXANDER LANOSZKA AND MICHAEL A. HUNZEKER

Why the First World War ended in 1918 and not earlier remains a major puzzle. We propose a new theory that emphasizes how honor prolongs wars beyond what rationalist theories can explain. It argues that when honor is insulted, an affronted actor will strive to punish the offender. Absent an apology, the pursuit of a satisfactory punishment leads the affronted belligerent to ignore unfavorable battlefield information, hold logically irreconcilable beliefs, process information in emotional terms, and obsess over status. We predict that wars of prevention and territorial occupation are most likely to elicit honor considerations. We test our argument against an obscure episode in the war where Germany and the United States made peace overtures in December 1916. We demonstrate that honor concerns made Entente decision makers see German aggression as an affront to their honor that only the destruction of Germany's political regime could redress.

Why did the First World War end in November 1918 and not before? Though the rationalist literature on war termination offers reasons why the First World War ended when it did, these explanations have important empirical and theoretical shortcomings. Information-based arguments cannot account for why decision makers continued the war after it should have become apparent to all sides in 1916 that prolonged warfare would jeopardize their survival. Similarly, the argument that commitment problems undercut credible bargaining lacks empirical support. The territorial partitions and political

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compromises made in 1918 and 1919 as well as the adjustment of war aims throughout the conflict demonstrate the divisibility of the issues at stake. Finally, recent historical scholarship challenges the view that civilian decision makers continued the war to ensure their political and personal survival. Alternative approaches hardly fare better. Social psychological theories generally focus on the July Crisis, paying little attention to how the war ended or why it endured. Similarly, purely historical accounts of the war often take the expansion of combatant war aims, and the corresponding elimination of a potential bargaining space, as given.¹

The historical puzzle deepens when we consider an oft-forgotten episode in the war. Towards the end of 1916, a year in which the belligerents incurred massive casualties and saw their military strategies continuously fail on the Western Front, a series of diplomatic overtures for peace occurred. Germany was the first to propose talks, but the United States and other neutral countries advanced their own proposals shortly thereafter. Yet the Entente quickly rejected these offers to negotiate. As their internal deliberations indicate, Entente elites were far more concerned with how they should articulate their rejection than they were with the substance of the proposals.

Unsatisfied with existing explanations for this episode, we propose a theory of honor that builds on insights from social psychology and the constructivist literature on status competition and ontological security. We argue that honor considerations induced the Entente to bypass this opportunity to consider at least negotiating a settlement. Honor and the pursuit of such status became an end unto itself rather than a means to security. Honor led them to ignore negative battlefield information, pursue discredited strategies, hold logically irreconcilable beliefs and heightened threat perceptions, take personal umbrage with peace overtures, and ignore a promising opportunity to strike a war-ending bargain.

Honor—specifically, British honor—caused the Entente to reject the 1916 proposals offhand. Since Britain was the dominant global power in 1914, Germany's preventive war and violation of Belgian territory and neutrality impugned Britain's honor while challenging its status and continental commitments. With no apology or policy reversal forthcoming, British elites felt tremendous pressure to defend their honor, and so resorted to violence in order to humiliate Germany. As the war progressed, protecting British honor gradually evolved to mean the destruction of the German regime. Honor also caused British leaders to discount or otherwise ignore clear evidence that the war was going far worse than planned, and that its prosecution jeopardized the Empire's financial underpinnings. Honor thus eliminated the bargaining space that otherwise existed in 1916 because it made Britain regard the conflict as a brute-force fight to the finish.

¹ Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 226. See also David Stevenson, *The First World War and International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Our explanation illuminates why the war endured until 1918. The Central Powers—Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire—originally saw the war in coercive terms. The British-led rejection of the December 1916 proposals made them revise this assumption: the war was now about survival. Consequently, the Central Powers began to ignore rational opportunities to negotiate peace. Rather than reap the eastern rewards of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Germany launched the Spring Offensive that, although tactically successful, resulted in strategic failure and defeat in the First World War. Their war effort between January 1917 and November 1918 was less a gamble for resurrection than a futile effort to moderate an implacable adversary dedicated to its destruction. Thus, although the rationalist literature casts this war as a bargaining process, our findings complicate this view. Brute force rather than coercion largely defined this war of attrition, which only ended when it did because Germany was finally exhausted.

We proceed as follows. Section 1 reviews existing explanations for why the First World War ended. Section 2 defines honor and describes how it could affect the way belligerents fight wars. Sections 3 and 4 evaluate our theory by examining British war behavior in 1916. Consistent with our theory, section 3 shows that the British ignored and then cherry-picked battlefield information, lacked strategy, and subordinated policy to war. Section 4 demonstrates that these pathologies culminated in their emotional but cynical dismissal of the German and American peace overtures. Section 4 assesses alternative arguments. Section 5 describes the implications of our study and outlines directions for future research.

EXPLAINING THE END OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

To explain war, rationalist approaches assume that states, led by risk-averse decision makers, prefer to avoid inefficient fighting by striking a mutually acceptable bargain.² Bargaining might break down for three reasons, leading to war. First, because the international system is anarchic, states have incentives to misrepresent their resolve and capabilities. Consequently, information asymmetries lead states to adopt inappropriate estimates of costs and probabilities of victory. Second, the anarchic international system complicates the enforcement of agreements. If states cannot provide sufficient assurances and abide by their agreements, then states fight to resolve these commitment problems.³ Third, some goods are indivisible: any division strongly

² James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379–414. For an approach emphasizing ideas and perceptions, see Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

³ Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 169–203; Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

diminishes their value, thus reducing the bargaining range to zero.⁴ When wars begin, states still bargain, but costly fighting is the principal means of reaching a settlement.

International relations scholarship builds upon these theories to explain why the First World War ended in November 1918. It emphasizes the resolution of commitment problems and the incentives leaders faced for waging the war. It does not view information asymmetry as affecting the length of the war. If this was the case, belligerents should have started seeking peace by fall of 1916 when it became apparent that the war had become extremely costly.

Scholars highlight three commitment problems that undermined efforts to end the First World War. Dale C. Copeland argues that Germany launched a preventive war to forestall the rise of Russia.⁵ Dan Reiter highlights the international status of Belgium, arguing that German leaders felt they would remain vulnerable unless they annexed Belgium.⁶ Finally, Alex Wiesiger's analysis of unlimited wars implies that the Germans created a dispositional commitment problem when they launched a preventive war against Belgium and allowed atrocities to occur during the invasion. Such actions led the Entente to see Germany as insatiably aggressive, making regime change the only solution to this commitment problem.⁷

Another rationalist explanation for the war's length emphasizes domestic politics. Hein Goemans argues that leaders of regimes that mix autocratic and democratic features pick war-fighting strategies that ensure their survival. For leaders of such states, military defeat jeopardizes their political and personal survival. Thus, in the face of unfavorable information about battlefield outcomes, leaders of mixed regimes gamble for resurrection. Accordingly, German leaders adopted risky war strategies in early 1917 to retain power. Only when the domestic threat intensified in the fall of 1918 and military losses reached a tipping point did German leaders seek peaceful resolution. By contrast, Great Britain and France fought the war in a manner expected by rationalist explanations of war, adjusting their war aims based on the information received from the battlefield.⁸

Still, important puzzles remain. It is unclear why German leaders did not seek peace on the Western Front following Russia's capitulation. The

⁴ See Stacie E. Goddard, "Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 35–68; and Ron E. Hassner, "To Halve and to Hold: Conflicts over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility," *Security Studies* 12, no. 4 (October 2003): 1–33.

⁵ Copeland, *Origins of Major War*.

⁶ Reiter, *How Wars End*.

⁷ Alex Wiesiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁸ Hein Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the End of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

highly favorable terms that Germany extracted from the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk should have at least resolved concerns about Russia's future growth in power. Yet, rather than settling, Germany launched a major offensive on the Western Front. Moreover, evidence of German apprehensions over the status of Belgium is sparse. As Goemans commented in an assessment of Reiter's argument, continuing to fight out of worry for future British and French exploitation was to choose "suicide for fear of death."⁹ But Goemans's domestic explanation similarly cannot elucidate Germany's decision to launch Operation Michael and not use the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to placate domestic opposition.

Wiesiger's discussion of dispositional commitment problems has several weaknesses as well. Consider first the theory. When one state launches a preventive war to resolve a long-term commitment problem, the target of the preventive aggression often misinterprets the aggressor's motives and objectives. Consequently, targets of preventive aggression often adopt unlimited war aims, believing that only regime change can prevent future attacks because the aggressor is seen as naturally and irredeemably aggressive. Thus, even if the aggressor offers to discuss peace, such overtures are considered insincere. As a result, all belligerents end up fighting to the finish.¹⁰ The shortcomings of this argument are threefold. First, psychological research has uncovered that attribution bias is pervasive.¹¹ Individuals are more likely to attribute negative behaviors to the disposition of others but take credit for their positive behaviors. So why should attribution bias primarily arise in preventive wars and not other wars? If there is a link between preventive and unlimited war, why do we see far more unlimited wars than preventive ones? Second, the theory offers little insight as to the psychological mechanism through which belligerent decision makers evolve from making situational assessments of their adversaries to dispositional ones, or why only the dispositional assessments should endure. It does not adequately address how such collective beliefs emerge and constrain decision makers to pursue war despite the attendant costs and uncertainties. Finally, the argument could be reversed. If a belligerent has a dispositional commitment problem, and the adversary sees it as an insurmountable obstacle short of regime change and therefore wages unlimited war, then the belligerent might believe that its adversary has a dispositional commitment problem of its own. In the First World War, Germany had the problem of being Prussian militarist whereas Great Britain had the problem of legitimating its war effort in opposition to such values. Rationally, both states should recognize that such mutual beliefs

⁹ Hein Goemans, "H-Diplo Roundtable Review of Dan Reiter's *How Wars End*," *H-Diplo/ISSF* 3, no. 19 (2012): 14. <http://h-diplo.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-3-19.pdf>.

¹⁰ Wiesiger, *Logics of War*.

¹¹ Harold H. Kelley and John L. Michela, "Attribution Theory and Research," *Annual Review of Psychology* 31 (1980): 457–501.

foreclosed any bargaining and thus disavow them in the interests of settling peacefully.

The weaknesses that characterize Wiesiger's otherwise excellent study reflect a tendency among accounts centered on social psychological variables to explain war.¹² Such works have difficulty explaining why belligerents should continue to wage war without ever coming to their senses. Take, for example, Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney's claim that once leaders deliberately choose war, they adopt an "implemental mindset" that makes them overconfident, risk-acceptant, and less receptive to disconfirming evidence.¹³ It is unclear whether and when these mindsets attenuate over time. Accounts emphasizing the "cult of the offensive" face the same problem.¹⁴ If the reason for which a war ends also illuminates its initiation and continuation, as rationalist explanations of war claim, then social psychological approaches have an important shortcoming.¹⁵

A THEORY OF HONOR

Mindful of these issues, we advance a new theory of how honor affects fighting. We first define honor before discussing its effects on war.

Defining Honor

Individuals strive to enhance their self-esteem. A subjective self-evaluation of one's worth, self-esteem is valuable because individuals prefer positive conceptions of themselves to the feelings of shame and inadequacy that poor self-esteem produces.¹⁶ One way to gain self-esteem involves improving the status of the group in which the individual is a member. According to social identity theory, individuals bolster their self-image by praising the group in which they belong at the expense of others.¹⁷ A Canadian thus might find it

¹² See, for example, Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

¹³ Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, "The Rubicon Theory of War: How the Path to Conflict Reaches the Point of No Return," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 7–40.

¹⁴ See, for example, Stephen Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (October 1985): 80–117.

¹⁵ R. Harrison Wagner, "Bargaining and War," *Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (July 2000): 469–84. Wagner draws on Carl von Clausewitz's insight that war is an alternative form of politics, but overlooks how Clausewitz intended this statement to be normative rather than empirical.

¹⁶ Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 15–16.

¹⁷ Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," in *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, ed. Peter J. Burke (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

useful holding negative views of Americans because it would give her pride believing that Canada is superior to the United States.

Honor suggests strong self-esteem, yet these terms are not synonymous. Honor has five distinguishing attributes.¹⁸ First, it is a social asset that both confers and reinforces a reputation for abiding by commitments and respecting customs. Maintaining commitments can give someone honor, just as the desire to preserve honor constrains her to keep those very commitments. Second, honor “revolves around a person’s capacity to command deferential treatment from others who are, in other respects, like themselves.” An individual that has a dominant status in her milieu expects subordinate behavior from others.¹⁹ Third, commitments acquire a personal dimension because breaking them implies dishonor and thus damages the identity of the individual. Without honor at stake, commitments can be jettisoned with legal and political costs, but not psychological cost. For the offense to affect honor, it must involve a direct challenge to the status and prestige that the target believes it possesses and values.²⁰ Honor has an emotional valence; perceived losses to it are disproportionate to the objective harm itself.²¹

Fourth, because honor reflects status inequality, actors tend to treat it as zero-sum. When one party in a conflict gains honor, the other party necessarily loses honor. After all, if every party in a dispute claims to have increased their honor when that dispute is resolved, then honor loses some of its intrinsic value, especially in cases where besmirched honor demands restitution. Conversely, one side can deliberately dishonor its competitor in order to enhance its own sense of honor. The sociological literature on honor recognizes this perverse incentive. As Pitt-Rivers argues, “the victor in any competition for honor finds his reputation enhanced by the humiliation of the vanquished.”²² Honor’s last distinguishing attribute is that protecting

¹⁸ Although we treat honor as a distinct concept for theory-building purposes, we recognize that it is not always possible to disentangle honor from such related concepts as self-image, status, pride, and revenge. We thus use honor as shorthand for all these associated emotions.

¹⁹ On reputation and status, see Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, “Reputation and Status as Motives for War,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 371–93. Quote is from Ruth Horowitz and Gary Schwartz, “Honor, Normative Ambiguity and Gang Violence,” *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 2 (April 1974): 240. On international status seeking, see Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to US Primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 63–95; and Tudor A. Onea, “Between Dominance and Decline: Status Anxiety and Great Power Rivalry,” *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 1 (January 2014): 125–52.

²⁰ On offenses affecting honor, see Patricia M. Rodriguez Mosquera, Antony S. R. Manstead, and Agneta H. Fischer, “The Role of Honour Concerns in Emotional Reactions to Offences,” *Cognition and Emotion* 16, no. 1 (2002): 146–47. See also Jonathan Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (January 2010): 1–31. On the relationship between honor and reputation, see J. G. Peristiany, ed. *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965); F. H. Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²¹ Our description of honor makes sense of Daryl Press’s observation that decision makers care greatly about their own reputation but ignore those of their adversaries. See Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

²² Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honour and Shame*, ed. J. G. Peristiany, 24.

honor can be such a powerful motive that individuals and groups alike will stake their existence on it. That is, the desire to preserve or restore honor can lead to reversals in preference. Such reversals are inherently irrational, since rationality implies that preferences are complete, transient, and reflexive. The affronted individual can prioritize honor preservation over physical survival.²³

Yet we argue that this preference reversal is not always instantaneous. Nor does every threat or insult to honor lead to a preference reversal. Even in the heat of the moment, especially when commitments and security are threatened, honor can remain less salient than rational concerns for security. Nevertheless, honor concerns can grow in salience over time, as when one moves deeper into the domain of losses. The more the affronted party experiences failure in its efforts to restore its honor, the more important its honor becomes. Accordingly, the affronted party becomes more likely to privilege its reputation over its own survival. The opposite is also true. The more effective an affronted party's attempts to restore its honor, the more likely honor will remain subordinate to survival.

These five attributes suggest that honor preservation is necessary for ontological security. Rather than involving physical survival, ontological security concerns one's being or one's self-identity. With ontological security, individuals adopt routines to reduce fundamental uncertainty about who they are and their place in society. Ontological security is not always positive: individuals can remain committed to abusive relationships because separation undermines their self-conception and entails more uncertainty than they can tolerate. Ontologically insecure individuals feel displaced from their own self-identity and unsure how to navigate the social world. Indeed, if individuals do not behave consistently with their sense of self (that is, a dishonorable action), they risk feelings of shame and inadequacy that further erodes their self-esteem.²⁴ Fighting for honor is fighting for ontological security.²⁵

Honor has psychological effects, but cultural norms can determine the degree to which actors explicitly refer to honor in explaining and justifying their behavior. As a result, we should expect variation over time and between contexts. Richard Ned Lebow documents how honor concerns were

²³ Avner Offer, "Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honor," *Politics & Society* 23, no. 2 (June 1995): 213–41.

²⁴ Besmirched honor also implies a lack of due recognition, thereby producing suboptimal foreign policies. Michelle Murray, "Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition before the First World War," *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (October 2010): 656–88.

²⁵ See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Brent J. Steele, "Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War," *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 2005): 524–30; Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 2006): 341–70.

paramount in ancient Greece and re-emerged in medieval Europe.²⁶ Pitt-Rivers's anthropological work highlighted the prominence of honor in mid-twentieth-century Mediterranean society.²⁷ Yet honor is not an archaism. Modernity has obscured honor considerations with terms such as credibility, will, resolve, and reputation.²⁸ Despite this rhetorical shift, the underlying need for ontological security remains unchanged. To this day, individuals still internalize honor, see it as integral to self-identity, and act according to its demands.²⁹

Honor and Escalatory Violence

When honor is impugned, the effort to restore it unfolds in stages. After an affronted party feels that its honor has been sullied, it first seeks an apology from the offender. A sincere apology usually resolves the matter, but refusing to apologize amplifies the original offense because it further challenges the authority of the affronted party.³⁰ Violence becomes likely: the affronted party needs to punish the offender physically in order to protect its reputation.³¹ Whether through apology or physical punishment, the affronted party must restore its sense of honor by imposing a commensurate amount of shame on the offender.

Honor considerations can thus exhibit a ratcheting effect. When an offender manages to resist punishment, the affronted party becomes frustrated and grows more emotionally invested in honor. From the perspective of the affronted party, the problem shifts from "my adversary has offended my honor and should be punished" to "my adversary continues to offend my honor and should be punished more."³² Consequently, the conflict intensifies rather than abates, honor assumes greater importance than survival, the punishments demanded increase, and threat assessments expand. Therefore, when operating in the domain of losses, honor prevents cooler heads from prevailing.

²⁶ Lebow, *Cultural Theory*.

²⁷ Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status."

²⁸ Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 85–86.

²⁹ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen describe how individuals can internalize principles of conduct to calculate expected utility in "Institutional Perspectives on Political Institutions," *Governance* 9, no. 3 (July 1996): 247–64.

³⁰ O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War*, 117; Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 26. For another view of apologies, see Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

³¹ Our view of punishment resembles the description of vengeance found in Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann, "Revenge in International Politics," *Security Studies* 17, no. 4 (October 2008): 684–724. In our analysis, besmirched honor constitutes the primary moral outrage that elicits the grievance, creating an intense need to defend ontological security and status. Still, the distinction should not be exaggerated since besmirched honor demands vengeance.

³² Exacerbating the situation further, the losses borne in attempts to protect honor also become an issue of honor.

This mechanism resembles prospect theory, which predicts that actors will grow more risk acceptant when faced with losses.³³ However, a key difference exists between prospect theory and honor considerations. With honor the losses are not simply material (even if material losses, such as the loss of territory, trigger the loss of honor). They are also psychological because reputation and status are concerned.³⁴ Prospect theory suggests that extremely severe losses may lead the affronted party to gamble for resurrection. Yet deeply offended honor means that survival is no longer the primary goal. When honor is at stake and the affronted party finds itself in the domain of losses, the aggrieved party becomes willing to gamble for reputation.

Honor considerations also have the unfortunate effect of interacting with two other psychological biases. The first is the implemental mindset.³⁵ Once a group decides on a goal, such as restoring honor, it tends to display “a reduced receptivity to new information that may question the desirability or feasibility of the chosen goal,” preferring instead “information that supports the choice already made.”³⁶ The affronted party thus becomes more prone to experiencing cognitive dissonance, whereby it tries to reconcile two or more contradictory beliefs.³⁷ With regards to honor, this proclivity makes it difficult for the aggrieved party to realize that its attempt to restore honor jeopardizes survival. The second resembles the gambler’s fallacy whereby people tend to assume that a series of losses (or victories) must be followed by a victory (or loss).³⁸ Amid honor considerations in the domain of war losses, this cognitive bias generates an undue optimism that victory is imminent. The aggrieved party starts believing that continuing to punish the resisting adversary will finally reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Observable Implications for War Termination

Like much of the ontological security and constructivist literatures in the study of international security, we scale up our individual-level theory to state-level.³⁹ Our unit of analysis is the part of government that exerts ultimate

³³ Jack S. Levy, “Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1997): 87–112.

³⁴ Lebow, *Cultural Theory*, 365–68.

³⁵ Johnson and Tierney, “Rubicon Theory,” 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: Fifty Years of a Classic Theory* (London: Sage, 2007); Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

³⁸ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” *Science* 185, no. 4157 (September 1974): 1124–31.

³⁹ Constructivists claim that “states, like individuals, have physical and social drives.” Steele, “Ontological Security,” 524.

authority over foreign policy (for example, the National Security Council). We are agnostic about whether decision makers seek to defend their own honor or that of the national population.

We argue that honor preservation affects decisions to continue war-fighting in six ways. First, with no apology forthcoming, the affronted belligerent will not be satisfied until the offending adversary is punished and humiliated. Second, if the adversary militarily resists punishment, then the growing frustration of the affronted belligerent produces a ratcheting effect. Honor assumes even greater importance, making threat estimates more severe and expanding war aims. Affronted belligerents will find it harder to disentangle the goals they seek from the price they pay to achieve them. Consequently, honor considerations override whatever dispute or underlying commitment problem that triggered war in the first place. In extremis, the affronted belligerent seeks to destroy the adversary's political regime. Third, belligerents fighting for honor lack the introspection necessary to assess battlefield information objectively. When belligerents refer to battlefield information, we should see them cherry-pick information that justifies their drive to continue fighting. Fourth, war strategy goes unaltered because that would involve honest adjustments to new battlefield information. Specifically, unfavorable battlefield information does not cause them to reconsider or reduce war aims. Fifth, the affronted belligerent will dismiss efforts by the offending party to open peace talks if the overture lacks the self-humiliating apology that remedies the besmirched honor. Finally, the types of conflict most likely to elicit honor considerations are preventive wars between a rising state and a dominant state or when territory is seized and occupied. In cases of preventive wars, the privileged status and reputation of the dominant state is threatened, especially if the rising state attacks its commitments. As for territorial occupation, the violation of existing national boundaries insults national pride and identity, thereby publicly demonstrating the affronted state's military weakness. Losing territory suggests that the affected state is incapable of defending its own borders.

Certain pieces of evidence would disprove our honor-based theory and confirm a rationalist account. First, the aggrieved state refuses to consider de-escalation even though the aggressor issues an apology that is perceived as genuine and sufficiently humble; second, the aggrieved state decides to de-escalate even if the aggressor avoids/resists punishment; third, the aggrieved state continuously and objectively reassesses its strategic situation, with reference to the relevant political, economic, diplomatic, and military indicators; fourth, the aggrieved state is willing to revise either its strategies or its goals when such strategic assessments suggest its ends and means are no longer aligned; and finally, the preventive war fails to trigger honor considerations.

The rationalist challenge to our honor-based argument generates a very different set of expectations for how wars should evolve and end. To begin, belligerents collect battlefield information to understand their strategic situation. Information collection should occur independently of diplomatic initiatives pursued by the adversary. Moreover, war aims should adjust according to information received from the battlefield. Specifically, negative battlefield information should moderate war aims and lead belligerents to alter their strategies, reflecting the fewer means at their disposal. When one combatant offers to discuss peace, belligerents should at least consider it in terms of the resolve and capabilities the offer reveals. Belligerents should dismiss the tone of an offer as cheap talk and realize that any ambiguity contained in the offer serves as a hedge against conveying weakness. They should ignore bluster or statements assigning moral culpability—such things should not emotionally disturb them. Not being locked into an emotional implemental mindset, belligerents should coolly discuss the offer among themselves on its objective merits.

Lastly, the limits of our argument need clarification. As noted, the importance of honor is variable across space and time. Accordingly, not every conflict involves honor. Indeed, we can array the motivations of a conflict on a spectrum that ranges from involving purely material interest considerations (for example, wealth) to purely status (or honor) considerations. Honor is not always at stake—it might be absent sometimes. Yet at other times the honor-based mechanism we outline can trump any and all material motivations. It is even possible for material and honor-based motivations to exert an equal influence on decision makers. In such situations, decision makers can be torn because rationality points to one policy whereas honor points to another.

Unsatisfying as it may be, at this point we are not able to predict a systematic relationship between different types of conflict and whether material or honor-based motivations will dominate. At a minimum, we simply reiterate the testable claim that honor considerations will dominate in preventive wars between rising and dominant powers and wars involving the loss of sovereign territory. Because the Western Front of the First World War involved both a preventive war and the violation and occupation of sovereign territory, we use the rest of this paper to argue that the balance was tilted more towards nonrationalist factors if we are to understand that conflict.

HOW HONOR DISTORTS INFORMATION AND IMPLEMENTATION IN WAR

Nonrationalist factors played a role in the beginning of the First World War. Lebow documents how honor influenced Austrian and German diplomacy

leading up to the war—a war that can be construed as being fought between a dominant state (Great Britain) and a rising state (Germany). Honor considerations affected British decision makers as well.⁴⁰ Indeed, honor framed the initial decision to intervene. Sir Edward Grey even argued that British honor was at stake over whether to assist France and Belgium. In his 3 August 1914 address to Parliament, he declared: “If, in a crisis like this, we run away from those obligations of honour and interest as regards the Belgian treaty, I doubt whether, whatever material force we might have at the end, it would be of very much value in face of the respect that we should have lost.”⁴¹ And so Germany’s invasion of Belgium directly impugned Britain’s status as guarantor. Nevertheless, security motives such as preventing Europe from being dominated by a single power were initially prominent as well.⁴²

When Germany neither apologized nor withdrew, the war expanded. Efforts by the opposing armies to outflank each other in the fall of 1914 resulted in stalemate and a fortified system of trenches. On the Western Front, the Allies repeatedly tried and failed to make a breakthrough while Germany made important gains in the east. Germany was providing ample resistance throughout 1914, 1915, and 1916, the December of which it made peace overtures that the Entente flatly rejected.

Below we demonstrate that the observable implications of our theory were manifest in British decision making in 1916. Consistent with our expectations, we find that, as affronted belligerents, Britain ignored unfavorable battle information while ratcheting up military action when no compelling strategic reason for doing so existed. They were locked in an implemental mindset colored by an emotional obsession with British glory and German humiliation.

Ignoring Unfavorable Information

British leaders adopted an attrition strategy to defeat Germany, an understandable strategy given the relative distribution of military and economic power. However, attrition strategies require appropriate measures of strategic effectiveness to work.⁴³ Otherwise, a risk exists of exhausting oneself before the enemy. Britain’s supreme command failed to develop useful measures of strategic effectiveness. It did not collect information on important

⁴⁰ Lebow, *Cultural Theory*, 305–70.

⁴¹ Speech by Sir Edward Grey to the British House of Commons, 3 August 1914, 65 Parl. Deb., H. C. (5th ser.) (1914), 1823. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1914/aug/03/statement-by-sir-edward-grey>.

⁴² Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 541–47.

⁴³ Scott Sigmund Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Stephen P. Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

aspects of the war effort, cherry-picking instead what information they did receive. Such behavior accords with our honor-based theory.

From mid-to-late 1916, the minutes from War Committee meetings suggest a startling indifference to Britain's casualties; to the lack of progress on the all-important Western Front; to Britain's economic, industrial, and financial position; and to its allies' economic, industrial and financial situations. War estimates during this period largely focused on German manpower and morale.⁴⁴

This omission did not go completely unnoticed. In an internal War Committee memo submitted on 13 November, Lord Lansdowne noted that Britain had thus far neglected to assess accurately the war's costs.⁴⁵ Agreeing with the overarching plan to exhaust Germany, Lansdowne warned that without a fair and objective assessment of Britain's strategic situation, Britain risked winning a Pyrrhic victory:

It is none the less our duty to consider, after a careful review of the facts, what our plight, and the plight of the civilized world will be after another year, or, as we are sometimes told, two or three more years of a struggle as exhausting as that in which we are engaged. No one for a moment believes that we are going to lose the war; but what is our chance of winning it in such a manner, and within such limits of time, as will enable us to beat our enemy to the ground and impose upon him the kind of terms which we so freely discuss?⁴⁶

Given that British Prime Minister Lloyd George did not invite Lansdowne to rejoin the reorganized War Cabinet in December, and that Lansdowne was excoriated a year later after he publically called for peace, it is tempting to dismiss his November 1916 memo.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the War Committee took him seriously. Many departmental studies followed and the War Committee actively began to assess British performance along key parameters.⁴⁸

Yet even when the War Committee finally undertook a rigorous and comprehensive review of its strategic position by November 1916, it continued to draw biased and unwarranted conclusions from its newly collected data. The departments tasked with making these studies painted a gloomy

⁴⁴ See Records of the Cabinet Office (CAB) 37/157/25, British National Archives (BNA), Kew, Richmond, Surrey; CAB 37/157/32, BNA; 37/158/5, BNA.

⁴⁵ Lord Lansdowne was a member of the House of Lords. He held different high-level government positions before the war. He served on Herbert Henry Asquith's coalition cabinet until December 1916.

⁴⁶ CAB 37/159/32, BNA.

⁴⁷ The differences between the War Committee and the War Cabinet merit clarification since the British government continually changed its approach to coordinating the war effort. In late 1914 it created the War Council as an advisory body to the prime minister. In May 1915, it reconstituted the War Council as the Dardanelles Committee. In November 1915, the Dardanelles Committee became the War Committee. Finally, Lloyd George turned the War Committee into War Cabinet after assuming office in December 1916.

⁴⁸ See CAB 37/160/1, 3, 13, 15, 21, 25 and 31, BNA.

picture of shrinking resources and a resilient adversary. Still, British decision makers remained unfazed and, consistent with the gambler's fallacy, acted as if more of the same would result in victory.

Biased Assessment of the Prospects for Victory

This new information did not cause British leaders to question whether Entente victory was inevitable.⁴⁹ But the data collected did not offer a sound basis for thinking the Entente's prospects were trending upward. Although documents suggest that some decision makers and government officials were aware of the faltering British war effort, they remained unfailingly optimistic over the military chances for success in 1917. Writing to the War Committee, Lord Robert Cecil cautioned that "our situation is grave" and "may become desperate" as "the position in Allied countries is even more serious." Admitting that he was ignorant about how Germany was coping in the war, Cecil implausibly concluded that "our military advisers tell us that they believe next year we have a prospect of a great military success, and if this be so, I do not believe that the resisting power of the Central Empires could survive it. If therefore we can carry on for another year we have a reasonable prospect of victory. A peace now could only be disastrous."⁵⁰ He offered no explanation as to why the Entente would be more effective and successful in 1917 than it was in 1916.

Biased Assessment of Means

British leaders were similarly biased in their assessment of the French Army's newest war-winning doctrine. Historians suggest Lloyd George eschewed peace because he believed General Joseph Joffre's replacement, General Robert Nivelle, had a solution to the stalemate: his so-called *bataille de rupture*.⁵¹

However, Nivelle's concept was flawed in ways that should have been apparent at the time.⁵² First, it was developed against the relatively shallow German defenses at Verdun, but by the end of 1916 German units along the rest of the Western Front had adopted much deeper and more flexible positions. Second, soldiers still advanced in waves, leaving them dangerously exposed to flanking fire. Third, the concept did not resolve the underlying

⁴⁹ Even Lansdowne expressed this belief.

⁵⁰ Quotes from CAB 37/160/21, BNA.

⁵¹ Paddy Griffith, *The Great War on the Western Front: A Short History* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2008), 59.

⁵² Nivelle first employed this concept at Verdun. It used heavy suppressive (rather than destructive) artillery bombardments followed by infantry assaults whereby units plunged as deep as possible without regard for flank security.

technological deficiency that undermined all offensives in the First World War: mobile infantrymen could not coordinate with static artillery support. By insisting on deep penetrations, Nivelle guaranteed that his infantry had no way to adjust artillery support, allowing German defenders to fire on them with impunity.

Even if these problems were not obvious to Lloyd George or the military officers in his War Cabinet *ex ante* (although his position as the Secretary of State for War suggests that he should have been familiar with them), the decision to predicate British strategy on a largely untested concept was impetuous at best. After all, Nivelle was not the first general to discover a solution to the deadlock. Up until that point in the war, every Entente commander in chief had made the exact same claim. That Lloyd George rejected peace because of an untested doctrinal concept, when so many previous war-winning doctrines had already failed, is inexplicable without reference to cognitive biases.

Biased Assessment of Ends

The War Committee's strategic review in November and December 1916 did not trigger a revision of Britain's existing war aims.⁵³ It is reasonable to discount negative information and demand more from the adversary when favorable strategic changes are afoot. However, such optimism was unwarranted at the time. The absence of such a reappraisal is curious given the logical connection between ends (which remained unaltered) and means (which were clearly diminishing).

Of course, the fact that British war aims did not change in late 1916 should not obscure the fact that they had grown manifold since 1914. Indeed, as British losses mounted, so too did both its assessment of the German threat and its desire to punish German aggression. When Britain intervened in August 1914, it did so with limited war aims informed by its strategic and commercial interests.⁵⁴ Dismantling the German regime was not one of its goals. Yet the more it failed to achieve these objectives—the longer Germany

⁵³ Hein Goemans concurs but notes how Britain lessened its demands in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. French demands grew nevertheless. What few shifts in war aims that occurred reflected alliance politics so as to accommodate Italy. France still insisted on all of Alsace-Lorraine. Both allies agreed to destroy the Ottoman Empire, thereby enabling them to secure the bargains made in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Goemans, *War and Punishment*, 245. On "the Turkish question," see CAB 23/1/6, BNA.

⁵⁴ Hew Strachan, *The First World War Volume I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97–98.

resisted punishment—the more British elites cast Germany as inherently aggressive. This expansion of war aims culminated in 1916 with the consensus belief that destroying the German regime was necessary for ending the war.⁵⁵

Emotional Implementation

British leaders' willful ignorance and processing of information reflects an implemental mindset. But just because leaders have an implemental mindset, our theory is not necessarily confirmed. Historically, many leaders and bureaucrats behaved like myopic automatons for reasons other than honor. However, in late 1916 it was clear that senior British officials did not just approach the war (and the peace overtures) with an implemental mindset. Their implemental mindset was itself couched in emotional terms. Emotion and honor framed the issue, narrowed options, and truncated debate.

One striking example occurred in late November, as various government departments were submitting their aforementioned reports to the War Committee. General Robertson, chief of the Imperial General Staff, submitted a report laced with vitriolic language. He argued that “while it would unquestionably be a crime to prolong the war for one day longer than is necessary, it would be a greater and a cowardly crime to flinch from the effort which we may hope will give us a just and lasting peace.” He then accused the British elite of being infiltrated by “a certain number of cranks, cowards, and philosophers, some of whom are afraid of their own skins being hurt, whilst others are capable of proving to those sufficiently weak-minded to listen to them that we gain more by losing the war than by winning it.” Robertson concluded that “we need pay no attention to these miserable members of society. It is more pleasing to remember that the Empire as a whole, with the exception of Ireland, is ready to face anything in order to win the war. . . . In short, we need to have the same courage in London as have our leaders in the North Sea and France.”⁵⁶

Robertson's memorandum is astonishing considering Britain's longstanding obsession with maintaining civilian control over the military. The emotionally charged missive challenged his civilian superiors and slandered the loyalty and courage of anyone who dared disagree with him. Nevertheless, Robertson was allowed to frame the subsequent debate. Even as they criticized Robertson and his memorandum, Britain's most senior civilian leaders felt obliged to reiterate their patriotism, courage, and faith in British victory. The Foreign Office's reply was the sharpest, not least because Robertson claimed diplomatic failures undercut military success. It upbraided Robertson

⁵⁵ Memorandum of Conversation [hereafter MemCon], 5 April 1916, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter *FRUS*] 1916, Supplement, The World War (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1929), 22.

⁵⁶ CAB 37/160/15, BNA.

for allowing emotion and rhetoric to cloud his judgment. Still, it concluded by saying Robertson was in the best position to determine whether the time was ripe for peace.⁵⁷ Lansdowne penned a similarly harsh rebuttal, but he too prefaced his critique by asserting his patriotism and confidence in the British army.⁵⁸

That Britain's civilian leaders felt kowtowed by incendiary challenges to their masculinity and nationalism is telling. It suggests that a sense of individual honor compelled even the war's most powerful critics to pay lip service to Britain's inevitable victory. Since everyone believed that everyone else believed in a British victory, it is unsurprising that no one would seriously consider peace.

PEACE OVERTURES AS INDIGNATION

No strategic rationale existed for rejecting Germany's offer to negotiate. British war aims expanded despite battlefield information growing increasingly unfavorable. Optimism had little basis. Moreover, British leaders hardly changed their overarching strategy. Thus, by the time they received the German peace overture, information and strategy were almost divorced from each other. We now focus on the December 1916 peace overtures.

This episode began on 12 December 1916 when the German government issued a peace note to the Entente through neutral intermediaries.⁵⁹ Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg publicly announced the peace initiative in the Reichstag that afternoon, and Lloyd George's newly reorganized War Cabinet discussed it during a noon session on 13 December.⁶⁰ It soon became evident that the Entente would reject the offer. On 15 December, the U.S. ambassador in London cabled Secretary of State Lansing, noting: "The undoubted overwhelming feeling in and out of official life is opposed to the acceptance or even to serious consideration of any proposal unless definite and favorable terms are put forward by the German government. Nobody believes that such terms will be authoritatively put forth. The language and the tone of the proposal are considered insulting because of its boastfulness and its threat."⁶¹

Four days later, in a speech to the House of Commons, Lloyd George suggested that accepting the German offer would be "the costliest act of

⁵⁷ CAB 37/160/20, BNA.

⁵⁸ CAB 37/160/22, BNA.

⁵⁹ FO 371/2941, BNA. Telegram from Vienna to Lansing, 11 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 85 and Telegram from Berlin to Vienna, 11 December 1916, *Ibid.*, 85–86. The German High Command first considered making a peace offer in the late summer. Erich von Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story, August 1914–November 1918*, (New York: Harper, 1919), 1: 365.

⁶⁰ CAB 37/161/19, BNA. The cabinet minutes dedicated only a quarter of a page to the overtures.

⁶¹ Telegram from London to Lansing, 15 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 92–93.

foolery ever perpetrated by any statesmen.” Britain could not stop fighting until it rid Europe of military despotism.⁶² Although the Entente did not issue a formal rejection until 1 January, Lloyd George’s fiery rebuke removed any doubt within the German High Command that the Entente would continue fighting.⁶³

We will now demonstrate that the response of the Entente reflected the implemental mindset consistent with our honor-based explanation. We then show that they evaluated the overtures in an emotionally charged manner obsessed with status.

No Peace with Implemental Mindset

Lloyd George’s War Cabinet spent little time discussing the German peace note. As the minutes from the War Cabinet meetings held between 13 December and 1 January indicate, British leaders never deliberated over whether the overture was genuine. Nor did they discuss whether a compromise between rejecting and accepting the overture might exist; or whether they might accept the offer to negotiate.⁶⁴ Instead, after first learning about the offer in the morning papers on 13 December, the War Cabinet thought the only question worth pondering was why the British delegation at The Hague had failed to telegraph a full copy to London. The cabinet quickly agreed to “make a full investigation” for this administrative oversight and “to ensure that such lapses shall not recur.” It then shelved the matter and spent the rest of the meeting discussing Greece and how to repatriate Serbs in the United States to return to Europe so they could fight in the Entente’s armies.⁶⁵

The cabinet did not revisit the German offer until 15 December, despite having met twice on 13 December (to discuss food production and a captain of a merchant raider being tried by the Germans) and once on 14 December (to discuss manpower, female labor, Ireland, and reports from the India office). Even during the 15 December meeting, the cabinet simply pointed out that it still had not yet received an official copy of the overture and could not therefore deliberate. It then proceeded to discuss merchant shipping, aircraft construction, the Mesopotamian campaign, the Arab uprising, the Balkans, and railway shipments to France. On 16 December, without once having discussed the peace overture, the War Cabinet concluded that “the present peace movement, inaugurated by the German Chancellor, could only

⁶² Telegram from London to Lansing, 19 December 1916, *ibid.*, 101.

⁶³ Telegram from Paris to Lansing, 29 December 1916, *ibid.*, 123–125.

⁶⁴ War Cabinet meetings 4 to 23. See CAB 37/161/19, 20, 21, 26, 30, 34, 38, 42, 46 and CAB 37/162/3, 4, 11, 12, 17, 19, 20, 25, 28, 29, BNA. British leaders interpreted the overture as an either/or proposition whereas Ludendorff intended it as the first step in an iterative negotiation. Ludendorff, *Own Story*, 1: 367.

⁶⁵ CAB 37/161/19, BNA.

be regarded as a political maneuver.”⁶⁶ The War Cabinet did not meet on 17 December.

Its 18 December meeting contained what would be its longest single consideration of the matter. Despite acknowledging that it would be “bad policy to dismiss the proposal without examination,” the cabinet immediately focused on how to go about rejecting it.⁶⁷ Specifically, it debated whether to hold an inter-allied conference on the subject. However, such a conference “would tend to give the impression that the Allies were examining the question in detail, and were considering counterproposals.” And yet an inter-allied conference “would probably have the effect of producing a wrong atmosphere in regard to the war . . . and might raise false hopes.”⁶⁸ The War Cabinet compromised, deciding that the Allies should cooperate to write a common rejection, already drafted by the French. It then turned its attention to Constantinople, Greece, the Italian campaign, a program to ship rifles to Romania, and new government appointments. The cabinet only discussed the German offer one more time—on 28 December, and only in conjunction with the American peace note—before publishing its formal rejection.

When examining the whole of the War Cabinet’s deliberations during this period, it becomes apparent that British leaders were operating with an implemental mindset. Indeed, the War Cabinet minutes contained no discussion regarding the costs and benefits of entertaining the overtures. The slight consideration given to the overture focused only on justifying its rejection in a way that was propagandistically valuable. British leaders otherwise saw no reason to deliberate over matters of strategy: they had already dedicated themselves to war fighting. The war was no longer politics by other means; policy had instead become subordinate to war.

Honor and the Entente’s Reasoning

When it finally issued a formal response, the Entente articulated six reasons for refusing Germany’s overture. First, the offer obscured responsibility for the war while suggesting that the Central Powers had the advantage, “an assertion which is doubly inexact and which is sufficient to render barren any attempt at negotiation.”⁶⁹ Second, the offer was couched in haughty rhetoric, suggesting the Central Powers were neither serious about negotiating nor aware of their precarious strategic situation. Third, the offer was a strategic ploy intended to divide neutral opinion and justify unrestricted submarine warfare. Fourth, the offer was hollow. It lacked precise terms for initiating negotiations. Fifth, the Central Powers could not be trusted to abide by a

⁶⁶ CAB 37/161/34, BNA.

⁶⁷ CAB 37/161/38, BNA.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Telegram from Paris to Lansing, 29 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 123–25.

peace settlement, precisely because they violated their international commitments in 1914.⁷⁰ Finally, the offer was based on a war map that would benefit the Central Powers alone.

The first four justifications coincide with our honor-based explanation and so we discuss them briefly in this section. The last two explanations seem consistent with a rationalist account, and we therefore address them in the next section.

Arrogance and Obscured Responsibility?

British leaders took umbrage with the peace offer's tone and Germany's refusal to accept blame for the war. As one diplomat described the British reaction, "the language and the tone of the proposal are considered insulting because of its boastfulness."⁷¹ British and French leaders were likewise irritated by the German threat to continue fighting "to a victorious end, while solemnly disclaiming any responsibility before mankind and history" if the offer was refused.⁷³ Germany seemed steadfastly unapologetic, suggesting a lack of contrition that vexed British decision makers.

Although the German overture was poorly worded, tone does not provide a rational basis for rejecting a negotiation offer. Indeed, by taking the note's rhetoric personally, the Entente demonstrated a poor grasp of bargaining. As in poker, one should act as if one has a strong hand. In his postwar memoirs, General Ludendorff describes his irritation after learning the Entente was offended by the overture's wording: "The objection, that the tone of our offer had from the first made any acceptance impossible, was quite unsound. Our whole position compelled us to adopt a tone of confidence. . . it was essential that the peace offer should not impair the fighting quality of the army. . . . If the Entente had honestly desired a peace of justice and reconciliation it could have and should have entered into negotiations and brought forward its demands."⁷⁴ Admitting guilt for starting the war in the initial overture would have damaged Germany's bargaining position and its army's morale. Entente leaders would have used such an admission to demand more reparations.

Haughty rhetoric served another purpose. By floating a peace balloon in the first place, Germany risked signaling weakness. As discussed below, such fears were justified since the Entente did infer weakness from the offer. Using an arrogant tone and describing inflated bargaining advantages

⁷⁰ Germany had committed to respect Belgian neutrality.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Memorandum of Text of German Peace Offer from Secretary of State to Diplomatic Representatives in Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Japan, Romania and Serbia, 16 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 94.

⁷³ Ludendorff, *Own Story*, 1: 367–68.

hedged against such risks because German leaders knew their offer would be publicized. Since this offer arose from choice and not necessity, it had to be framed so as to reassure German citizens and soldiers. Because they governed democratic polities, Entente leaders should have recognized this constraint. Though it was reasonable for them to express outrage to placate their own domestic audiences, they did not have to take the rhetoric so personally.

Duplicitous and Hollow?

Sincere apologies can restore honor, but for British decision makers the peace overtures committed the double sin of being unapologetic and insincere. In private deliberations, public speeches, and their official rejection, Entente leaders emphatically portrayed the German peace offer as duplicitous maneuvering—"a veritable war ruse."⁷⁴ They saw several ulterior motives at play, including: buttressing domestic public opinion, undermining public opinion in the Entente, swaying public opinion in neutral countries, and justifying illegal wartime practices like unrestricted submarine warfare.

Consistent with the sense of threat that besmirched honor generates, the Entente made contradictory claims about the peace overtures. The Entente accused the Central Powers of cheap talk. Yet they simultaneously imbued this cheap talk with the power to shape global opinion despite being a costly signal of German weakness. Two years into a global war it is incomprehensible that a single peace offer could deceive public opinion and undercut morale. If a public invitation to negotiate was powerful enough to alter an adversary's domestic opinion, then why did Germany wait until 1916 before trying? Why were there not more peace overtures, especially when the military balance was more lopsided? If cheap ploys worked this effectively, then why did the Entente not attempt something similar?⁷⁵

Declaring the offer a deceptive ploy (to maximize dubious benefits) ignores its very real costs. Making an overture risks signaling weakness.⁷⁶ To mitigate this concern, the Germans sought to use the United States as a clearinghouse for peace overtures as early as September 1916.⁷⁷ German apprehensions were justified. The Entente's diplomatic and political deliberations show that its leaders saw the offer as indicating "severe economic strain

⁷⁴ MemCon, 15 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 92–93; MemCon, 16 December 1916, *ibid.*, 95; Text of Lloyd George's Speech to the House of Commons as Described in MemCon, 19 December 1916, *ibid.*, 101; Erich von Ludendorff, *The General Staff and its Problems: The History of the Relations Between the High Command and the German Imperial Government as Revealed by Official Documents* (New York: Dutton and Company, 1920), 1: 301–2.

⁷⁵ The two sides might not have made overtures knowing that they represented ineffective cheap talk. This hypothesis explains the relative absence of peace offers throughout 1914 and 1915, but it leaves unexplained why Germany would make an overture in 1916.

⁷⁶ Gary Uzonyi and Paul Poast, "Why is Conflict Mediation Rare?: Resolve and Signaling in Conflict Resolution" (working paper, Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2012).

⁷⁷ The Ambassador in Germany to Lansing, 25 September 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 55.

and of greater weakness than the English had suspected.”⁷⁸ The Germans were acutely aware of this risk. It informed General Ludendorff’s decision to make the offer after Bucharest fell and to frame it in victorious terms.⁷⁹

The Entente also claimed that the German offer was insincere because it failed to include specific terms. This argument fails to withstand scrutiny. Several compelling reasons existed for omitting terms. Although German elites agreed that a peace window existed, they could not agree on the terms.⁸⁰ They did not want to miss out on an opportunity to conclude the war over internal bickering, so they compromised on a general overture. Entente leaders cannot be faulted for not knowing about internal debates within the German government. However, they should have still recognized the strategic logic behind ambiguity. Specifying terms had two risks: if they were too harsh, they risked scuttling talks before they began; if they were too soft, they risked conceding too much at the outset. Thus, even if German leaders agreed on their goals and red lines, it was reasonable not to disclose such information at first.

The Entente once again invoked inconsistent logic. As their official rejection telegram makes clear (and public speeches as well as private deliberations reiterate), the Entente found the German offer unacceptable because it failed to address their core terms: “No peace is possible as long as the reparation of violated rights and liberties, the acknowledgement of the principle of nationalities and of the free existence of small states shall not be assured; as long as there is no assurance of a settlement to suppress definitely the causes which for so long as time have menaced nations and to give the only efficacious guarantees for the security of the world.”⁸¹

If the German offer lacked specificity, then the Entente could not have known the Germans would reject the Entente’s core terms before negotiations. Conversely, if the Entente felt compelled to reject talks because it knew its terms were incompatible with German goals, then the offer must not have been ambiguous. The German offer needed to be rejected because either it lacked terms or it expressed fundamentally disagreeable terms. Only one of these two claims could logically be true. The Entente behaved as though both were.

A Third Way?

The choice was not between accepting or rejecting Germany’s peace overture, since the United States advanced its own overture.⁸² On 20 December,

⁷⁸ MemCon, 15 December 1916, *ibid.*, 92–3.

⁷⁹ Ludendorff, *Own Story*, 1: 364–66 and Ludendorff, *General Staff*, 1: 283–87.

⁸⁰ Ludendorff, *General Staff*, 1: 275–87.

⁸¹ Text of Allied Reply to the Central Powers to Discuss Peace, Conversation of the Ambassador in Great Britain and Secretary of State, 29 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 123–24.

⁸² CAB 23/1/13, BNA.

U.S. president Woodrow Wilson officially extended his offer for the belligerents to enter negotiations under his mediation.⁸³ Upon disassociating his peace overture from the German one, Wilson asked all belligerents to clarify their terms for peace and which assurances they would need before engaging in negotiations. He noted what he perceived to be the similarities between the belligerents: "The objects which the statesmen of the belligerents on both sides have in mind in this war are virtually the same. . . . Each side desires to make the rights and privileges of weak peoples and small States as secure against aggression or denial in the future as the rights and privileges of the great and powerful states now at war. Each wishes itself to be made secure in the future." Wilson concluded the note by disingenuously explaining that he was neither "proposing peace" nor "offering mediation." Rather, he wanted the belligerents to open dialogue.⁸⁴

The Entente responded to Wilson's note negatively. Honor concerns once again resurfaced. The Entente decried the insinuation that their war aims, and thus their responsibility for the conflict, were identical to those of the Central Powers. Wilson also impugned their honor-based conception of themselves. The British permanent under-secretary of the Foreign Office found the letter as an unfriendly "slimy . . . mass of murkiness" intended to cause dissension within the Entente.⁸⁵ After reading Wilson's statement, King George V allegedly "wept while he expressed his surprise and depression."⁸⁶

British elites also expressed dismay that Wilson's note appeared so soon after the German offer. The U.S. ambassador to Britain sought to assuage concerns of collusion, emphasizing that the United States had the "intention" to make such a statement "independent of the German note."⁸⁷ Indeed, because the Germans approached him in September to act as a third-party mediator, Wilson made his statement after the German overture to save face. Should the Entente reject the German note, the Entente could refer to Wilson's overture if it wished to negotiate without having Germany seem the most interested in peace.

Yet the British feared Wilson's intervention because of the financial power that the United States could have brought to bear. Cecil noted that "it

⁸³ On 21 December, Secretary of State Robert Lansing intimated that the United States needed to learn belligerent war aims before entering the war. Historians dispute whether Lansing shaped the British response since Lansing's statement failed to endorse Entente war aims. See Sterling Kernek, "The British Government's Reactions to President Wilson's 'Peace' Note of December 1916," *Historical Journal* 13, no. 4 (December 1970): 736–43. We only found evidence that Lansing's statement dismayed (and thus did not embolden) the Entente decision makers. For more on Wilson, see Elizabeth Sanders, "The War and Peace Election of 1916," in *America at the Ballot Box: Elections and American Political History*, ed. Gareth Davies and Julian Zelizer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁸⁴ CAB 23/1/13, BNA.

⁸⁵ Kernek, "British Government's Reactions," 747.

⁸⁶ MemCon, 22 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 108–9.

⁸⁷ CAB 23/1/10/2.

must . . . be recognized that if he [Wilson] desired to put a stop to the war, and was prepared to pay the price for doing so, such an achievement is in his power."⁸⁸ Following the Federal Reserve Board actions against the pound sterling in late November, the British commissioned an internal investigation to understand the potential impact of U.S. financial coercion.⁸⁹ Such concerns intensified with the peace overtures. Cecil observed that "unless I misread his character, it is not impossible that he might take even very violent action to enforce he regarded as a just peace."⁹⁰ Lord Arthur Balfour echoed this view.⁹¹ The British wanted to reject the peace overtures, but only in a way that would avoid U.S. financial pressure.

The implemental mindset shaped these deliberations. In considering Wilson's note, British decision makers agreed that the response should articulate moral principles so as to broaden its appeal, since propaganda efforts in the United States were failing. Appealing to moral principles, in their view, would help defeat the notion of pursuing peace without military victory.⁹² Accordingly, some British decision makers wanted to exploit the language of Wilson's note to echo the U.S. president's moral sentiments. After all, they were dissatisfied with British propaganda efforts in the United States.⁹³ As Balfour expressed: "His Majesty's Government desire to express their appreciation of the services which the President has performed for the cause of humanity by publicly expressing to the world suffering, as never before, under the horrors of war, that the mere termination of hostilities would provide no sufficient cure for our ills; that what civilization requires is some security that peace when it comes shall be honourable and lasting."⁹⁴

The British wished to obtain greater sympathy for the Entente, especially among Americans. They used the reply to Wilson's note to improve Entente propaganda in the United States. Such was the thoroughness of the Entente's disinclination to consider peaceful negotiations.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE PEACE INITIATIVE'S FAILURE

British decision makers disregarded negative battlefield information, remained committed to discredited strategies, escalated military action and war

⁸⁸ Quoted in Kernek, "British Government's Reactions," 727. See also CAB 37/162/3, BNA.

⁸⁹ CAB 23/1/13/1, BNA.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ CAB 1/21/8, BNA.

⁹² Kernek, "British Government's Reactions," 765.

⁹³ CAB 24/3/39, BNA. US sympathy for the Entente's cause waned during 1916. W. B. Fest, "British War Aims and German Peace Feelers during the First World War (December 1916–November 1918)," *Historical Journal* 15, no. 2 (June 1972): 291.

⁹⁴ CAB 37/162/31. See also Kernek, "British Government's Reactions," 756.

aims, understood the peace overtures largely in emotional terms, and held logically irreconcilable views about the motivations behind the peace overtures. These observations are consistent with our honor theory. Yet several plausible counter-arguments are possible, including the remaining two justifications advanced by the Entente: that Germany had unique commitment problems (regarding Belgium) and any peace overture would disproportionately benefit Germany. These counterarguments overlap with rationalist explanations of war and so we address them here.

German Commitment Problems

There first exists the assertion that because Germany and Austria-Hungary violated their commitments in 1914, they could not be trusted to respect a settlement. A major problem undermines this view: Belgium, which had the most to lose from future German noncompliance and aggression, did not seem to question Germany's credibility, as evidenced by the fact that British and French leaders worried Belgium might make a separate peace. At the inter-allied conference held in late December, the French and the British exchanged views on Belgium. The French minister of finance lamented that the "Belgian Government had already shown a perilous tendency to make a special case of Belgium." Speaking for French Prime Minister Aristide Briand, a French diplomat noted that: "The best argument that the Allies had [with the United States] was Belgium; but if Belgium were allowed to say that she was a victim, not a belligerent in the way that the rest of the Allies were . . . and that all she asked she was to be restored to the position which she had undeservedly lost—this would be exactly the end at which the Germans were aiming."⁹⁵ The irony is that Belgium had its own commitment problem that vexed the Entente, thereby complicating the view that German commitment problems regarding Belgium drove the war.

Prussian militarism, and the German regime that promoted it, was another alleged commitment problem. To avoid fighting the same war in the future, the current one could not end until Prussian militarism was "broken beyond all repair."⁹⁶ Notwithstanding the "suicide from fear of death" logic, by adopting the destruction of the German regime as a war aim, the Entente was committed to a brute-force objective and was therefore responsible for the absence of a bargaining space.⁹⁷ Still, brute force goals can be rational,

⁹⁵ Quotes on Belgium from CAB 28/2/59, BNA. The British also saw the propaganda value of Belgium, but were not opposed to separate replies per se. CAB 23/1/18, BNA.

⁹⁶ Fest, "British War Aims," 290.

⁹⁷ German authorities recognized this problem with the Entente's diplomacy. In April 1916, Bethmann-Hollweg said that Germany would not entertain peace negotiations until the British repudiated calls for the "utter destruction of Prussian militarism." Ambassador in Germany to Lansing, 5 April 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 23.

as in the Second World War. The problem with rejecting the German peace offer on the basis of Prussian militarism was that strong indications appeared that the war was beginning to spur liberalization within German society.

Mass mobilization was starting to have the same effect on Germany that it was having on Britain and France. As was well documented in the press and diplomatic cables, a moderate coalition, including members of the elite, was coalescing around a *neu Orientierung*. Believing that postwar German society could not return to prewar norms, it called for electoral reform, including discarding the three-class voting system; redistricting to shift power towards urban areas; better treatment for ethnic minorities living within the German Empire; more education for poorer classes; and a parliamentary government with a chancellor responsible to the Reichstag.⁹⁸ Thus, by prolonging the war the Entente managed to undercut the very goal they were trying to achieve by force of arms alone.

The Entente could have tailored its response to the German note to exploit these emerging cleavages in German society. Instead, its response helped delegitimize the German pacifist movement and enhance the political position of the German military establishment at the expense of the civilian authorities. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg could not repudiate the German military's insistence on pursuing a U-boat war. Though critical of Germany's diplomacy in December 1916, historian Kent Forster acknowledges "the general temper of public opinion after the Entente rejection of the peace offer would have made any attempt by the Chancellor to defy the decision of the Supreme Command more than hazardous."⁹⁹ The Entente's response to Wilson's overture further undermined German civilian leaders by declaring peace could only follow victory.

Incompatible War Aims and Nonexistent Bargaining Space

Hew Strachan echoes the Entente's claim that it was impossible to negotiate based on the December 1916 status quo. The Central Powers effectively occupied everything the Entente wanted. Therefore, little opportunity existed for the Entente to bargain for any of its core goals. For their part, British and French leaders echoed this logic, insisting that the German offer was based on a war map that would benefit the Central Powers alone.¹⁰⁰ Yet again the Entente could not claim to know what the Central Powers were willing to compromise in a negotiation.

⁹⁸ MemCon, 17 October 1916, *ibid.*, 61–64.

⁹⁹ Kent Forster, *The Failures of Peace: The Search for a Negotiated Peace during the First World War* (Washington, DC: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941), 58–59.

¹⁰⁰ Text of Allied Reply to the Central Powers to Discuss Peace, Conversation of the Ambassador in Great Britain and Secretary of State, 29 December 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 123–24.

Germany had achieved a major share of its strategic objectives by the end of 1916. It made territorial gains in central-eastern Europe at the expense of a severely weakened Russia. If fears of a stronger Russia prompted Germany to initiate preventive war, then such concerns should have by then waned. Indeed, Germany's eastern war aims saw considerable expansion. In the west, one major modification discussed concerned guarantees over Belgium; if these guarantees proved inadequate, then Germany would seek to annex Liège and its surrounding areas.¹⁰¹ With its position significantly stronger in the east, Germany was now able to reduce its demands in the west.¹⁰² Diplomatic cables suggest that the Central Powers were willing to agree to far more of the Entente's demands than the popular narrative suggests. Such concessions included evacuating Belgium and Northern France, restoring Serbia to its prewar borders, and forming a peace league. Furthermore, the Central Powers were open to discussing Italy and Alsace-Lorraine once an armistice was in place.¹⁰³

We have shown that the Entente's war aims grew in 1916 despite unfavorable battlefield outcomes. Yet the war aims of all the belligerents expanded less on the Western Front and more on the Eastern and Southeastern Fronts. Although the Western Front was the most important front, the paradox is that war goals often centered on the east. Accordingly, a bargaining range amongst the belligerents existed. The Germans and the Russians could have struck a bargain on the Eastern Front, and the Germans and the Entente could have negotiated guarantees respecting territorial sovereignty in Western Europe. The aims were not as irreconcilable as Strachan argues, something that the Entente also failed to recognize at the time.

Other Rationalist Explanations

Those reasons for rejecting the peace offers that accord most closely with rationalist explanations do not withstand scrutiny. However, at least two other potential rationalist explanations for the Entente's behavior are possible.

ANTICIPATING U.S. INTERVENTION

One intuitive explanation is that the Entente anticipated an American intervention. Such a change would have—and did—tip the balance decisively in

¹⁰¹ For the view that a rising Russia motivated Germany to launch preventive war, see Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*.

¹⁰² Goemans refers to a November 1916 telegraph enumerating German war aims to show that they expanded throughout 1916. Goemans, *War and Punishment*, 102.

¹⁰³ MemCon, 19 November 1916, *FRUS 1916*, Supplement, 61–64.

the Entente's favor. Yet this explanation suffers from hindsight bias.¹⁰⁴ Available archival records do not support the idea that British leaders rejected the German offer because they believed the United States would soon intervene. Although the United States eventually entered the war in April 1917, its intervention hardly seemed inevitable to British leaders in December 1916. Germany's unrestricted submarine campaign remained only a threat. Arthur Zimmerman did not dispatch his infamous telegram until mid-January 1917. And a series of cables from the British ambassador to the United States made clear that the political environment was decidedly working against British interests. President Wilson was reelected on a wave of isolationist sentiment. Congress was under Republican control, and senior Congressional leaders, including the Speaker of the House, were vehemently anti-British.¹⁰⁵ Business interests were irritated with the blockade. Many ordinary Americans either supported Germany or begrudged Britain for supporting the South during the Civil War and its policies towards Ireland and Greece.¹⁰⁶

In fact, British-American relations reached a nadir in late 1916. Far from counting on American support, British leaders were worried that the United States might use its power to impose an end to the war. The Federal Reserve Board's decision to discourage American banks from loaning money to Britain shocked the British and suggested that such a scenario might be likely. In mid-November, a study by the Committee on Imperial Defense identified the need to "diminish dependence of the Allies upon the [United States]" as one of Britain's three most urgent challenges.¹⁰⁷ A Foreign Office study concluded that Britain might need to revisit its avowed policy not to engage in peace negotiations if the United States were to withhold support.¹⁰⁸

BRITISH DOMESTIC AUDIENCES

Another counterargument is that British leaders could not broach peace because of concerns over the public's response after years of intense anti-German propaganda. However, this counterargument presumes that British leaders were objective but were led astray by a hotheaded public. We found no evidence that British decision makers felt hamstrung by a

¹⁰⁴ On the US intervention, see Galen Jackson, "The Offshore Balancing Thesis Reconsidered: Realism, the Balance of Power in Europe, and America's Decision for War in 1917," *Security Studies* 21, no. 3 (July 2012): 455–89.

¹⁰⁵ The British ambassador to the United States referred to the Speaker as "a most determined and inveterate enemy of England." CAB 37/160/18, BNA.

¹⁰⁶ CAB 37/159/18, BNA; CAB 37/159/18, BNA. As the British ambassador to Russia informed the British Foreign Office following a conversation with his American counterpart, "His Excellency said that what the United States were afraid of was war with Germany and not the Allies." FO 317/3075, BNA.

¹⁰⁷ CAB 24/2/46, BNA.

¹⁰⁸ This observation suggests again that Britain subordinated policy to war fighting. CAB 37/161/38, BNA.

vindictive public. To the contrary, they voiced concern over the growth of pacifist movements in Britain.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, growing tensions in Ireland suggest latent popular demand for curtailing the war effort. Nor did we find evidence of leaders being fearful of dampening the resolve of an already war-weary public by entering into peace negotiations that might fail. In fact, leaders of the world's most mature democracy hardly seemed to care how voters would judge a chance to end history's bloodiest war to date.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS OF OUR STUDY

This paper advances a new theory of how honor considerations affect war, testing it against the December 1916 peace overtures. We conclude here by recapitulating our argument, discussing its implications for First World War historiography, highlighting its importance to international relations theory, and highlighting its limitations and directions for future research.

To review, our theory predicts that honor-based considerations can cause actors to escalate more quickly, fight more intensely, and de-escalate more slowly than rationalist theories would expect. Wars in which honor concerns dominate exhibit these characteristics because the need to restore honor distorts how actors process information and adjust their strategies. Honor exerts this influence because it can be integral to an actor's self-identity. Losing honor means losing the ability to define and understand oneself. Violence can intensify when an offending party refuses to apologize for impugning another's honor or when the offended party fails to impose an acceptable punishment in retaliation. Although it is hard to know what types of disputes will trigger honor considerations *ex ante*, since honor can operate alongside or subordinate to rational interests, we predict that conflicts between rising and status quo powers and fights over territory are most likely to make honor considerations salient. Finally, because honor is zero sum, wars in which honor considerations trump all other interests are likely to end in only one of two ways: the successful imposition of punishment to redress the besmirched honor or the inability of at least one side to continue fighting.

Our theory illuminates why Britain bypassed an important opportunity to negotiate an end to the First World War in December 1916. Germany challenged British honor and identity by violating Belgian territory. With no apology forthcoming, British leaders escalated. By late 1916, they held logically irreconcilable views regarding the Central Powers, willfully chose inefficient strategies to achieve their desired ends, and failed to modulate their war aims in accordance with battlefield information. Driving these pathologies was a strong emotional undercurrent centered on status and revenge. We also find

¹⁰⁹ CAB 37/159/12, BNA.

that traditional accounts on what forestalled the end of the First World War have important shortcomings. The reasoning and diplomatic exchanges of Entente politicians did not involve those commitment problems that rationalist accounts emphasize to explain the war's duration. We are confident that we have exhausted the available top-level archival documents to cast doubt on these explanations and demonstrate the validity of our own. Still, we admit that we have no smoking gun evidence and acknowledge how archival documents may not capture what leaders said or thought behind closed doors.

Implications for First World War Historiography

If correct, then our analysis suggests that the British bear more responsibility for the First World War lasting as long as it did than the conventional wisdom admits. The British denounced the peace overture in the name of destroying Prussian militarism. By doing so, they inadvertently strengthened Prussian militarism by undercutting pacifist sentiment in Germany and strengthening the decision making role of the German military. Consequently, German civilian leaders could not ask their military counterparts to postpone unrestricted submarine warfare. The results are well known: Germany escalated its military effort by launching the unrestricted submarine campaign; the United States responded by declaring war on Germany as an associated power; the Entente renewed its offensives, including the prolonged and horrific Battle of Passchendaele; and the war progressed with little meaningful change on the Western Front until the Hundred Days Offensive that began in August 1918. When the war finally ended with the November 11 Armistice, over nine million combatants had been killed and four empires had collapsed. The British Empire remained but its financial power was severely weakened. France also faced economic devastation. Ex post inefficiency understates the havoc wreaked by the First World War.

Yet one puzzle remains: why did Germany decide against negotiating an end to the war after Russia's exit? It could have used the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in early March 1918 to appease domestic opposition and seek a general peace. Instead, Germany launched a spring offensive shortly thereafter.¹¹⁰

Our analysis makes sense of Germany's decision. The failure of the overtures clarified the Entente position all too well. Specifically, the British response to the peace overtures in December 1916 led the Germans to conclude that Britain was more interested in fighting to the finish rather than reaching some peaceful settlement.¹¹¹ Accordingly, by late 1917 German

¹¹⁰ Goemans, "H-Diplo Roundtable Review of Dan Reiter's *How Wars End*," 14.

¹¹¹ Ludendorff, *Own Story*, 1: 368.

leaders may have reasoned that it would be futile to seek a general peace after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Animated by honor considerations and the need to crush Prussian militarism, British leaders created an intractable commitment problem. By plainly advocating regime change in Germany, the members of the Entente could not credibly assure Germany that they would respect its political system. Thus, Germany's spring offensives may have been designed to demonstrate its determination to continue fighting and induce the British to a more pragmatic assessment of the war. Despite the tactical successes of this offensive, the result was strategic failure amid heavy casualties and ill-advised territorial gains. The Spring Offensive exhausted Germany and allowed the Entente to finally win the war. What ended the conflict was less a bargained outcome as it was the devastating attrition of Germany's military. The British were fortunate that they did not have to resolve their own commitment problem.

Implications for International Relations Theory

Our argument regarding honor has broader significance for international relations theory. First, the psychological biases that induce leaders to start wars might not attenuate over the course of the conflict. Rather, perceptions of status and umbrage could encourage them to ratchet up their war effort and fight longer and harder than rationalist explanations would predict. Indeed, the dynamics we explored in this paper can be found in other historical cases. Richard Ned Lebow describes how honor-based customs can limit violence, but his examples show how often struggles for honor can degenerate into paroxysms of violence as well.¹¹² Richard Nixon campaigned for the presidency calling for a peace with honor in his desire to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam. Once in office, he instead escalated and expanded that conflict with incursions into Cambodia and Laos and a massive bombing campaign over North Vietnam. Honor considerations may have played a role in prolonging U.S. efforts to disengage from the Korean War, Iraq, and Afghanistan as well.

Second, we show how preventive wars fought between rising states and dominant states and disputes over territory become unlimited. Honor considerations can lead dominant states to respond disproportionately to the aggressiveness of the rising state for fear that its general commitments are at stake. The inability to punish the rising state satisfactorily might reverse preferences whereby the dominant state is willing to risk its own survival just to preserve its reputation. If so, then our theory highlights an important, yet underexplored, source of conflict escalation in East Asia. In that region we see power transition and territorial disputes both at play.

¹¹² Lebow, *Cultural Theory*.

Our theory suggests that a dispute between Japan and a rising China over their sovereignty claims in the East China Sea could produce a quick escalation into violence that is disproportionate to the material interests in question.

Finally, we analyze how self-image concerns can severely distort foreign policy. Honor considerations still exist, but modernity's rationalist language obscures them with terms like credibility. Honor encompasses such concepts, but supplies them with an emotional meaning for one's self-identity. It is thus unsurprising that we observe leaders caring about their own credibility and reputation while dismissing those of others.¹¹³ For decision makers, these attributes may matter less for interstate signaling than for preserving their conception of both themselves and the governments they lead.

Directions for Future Research

Our argument admittedly has important limitations, but these gaps provide opportunities for theorizing and research. First, we have not identified the full range of issues likely to trigger honor considerations. Doing so would be useful to scholars and policymakers alike. Preemptive strikes by rising powers against status quo powers in addition to territorial seizures are highly likely to provoke honor considerations. After all, both types of disputes affect national identity. Still, it remains uncertain whether other conflicts generate similar dynamics.

Second, how does honor interact with rational and material interests? Our theory does not predict that honor, once invoked, will always trump material and rational pursuits. In most instances, rational goals should dominate honor considerations, although Daryl Press's work cautions us that credibility concerns only appear rational. Alternatively, the two mechanisms could operate equally. In either case, scholars should examine how these mechanisms interact to determine the conditions under which honor trumps rationalist interest, and vice versa.

Finally, future research should investigate the microfoundations of honor. We took our unit of analysis to be the part of government that exerts ultimate authority over foreign policy. However, we sidestepped the question as to whether decision makers are acting to defend their own honor or on behalf of the honor of the national population. Yet another possibility is that these elites mistakenly see their own personal honor and national honor as linked. Scholars should determine how concerns of honor operate in the minds of decision makers as well as their impact on policy.

¹¹³ Press, *Calculating Credibility*.

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