Certainty and War

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Certainty and War

A dissertation presented

by

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to

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Certainty and War

Abstract

Does greater certainty about an adversary’s attributes cause peace? What states believe they can secure through force dictates the diplomatic settlements they will accept. In prevailing accounts which preclude assessment errors, certainty promotes peace as states can readily identify agreements preferable to war. Yet, empirically, high-certainty assessments often contribute to bargaining failure, rather than success. This dissertation resolves the tension. Assessments are not objectively given; leaders must form them through subjective processes. Consistent with behavioral studies, leaders are often more certain than available information warrants. Incorporating these overprecision errors, I show certainty can increase the risk of war. Hence, the relationship between certainty and war is conditional.

Whether estimates are overprecise depends on the information leaders receive from advisers who have specialized expertise due to a division of labor. Failure to tap into this expertise generates overprecise estimates. This is particularly likely when leaders fail to gather information pertinent to an adversary’s political (versus military) attributes by marginalizing a state’s diplomats—such as US State Department officials. Bureaucracies affect state behavior through the substantive expertise they provide, not through parochial preference divergences which dissipate during crises.

To test the argument I construct a measure of certainty using an original corpus of declassified security documents from US Cold War crises. Quantitative tests using the measure demonstrate that State Department officials provide assessments with less certainty than counterparts and the relationship between certainty and conflict is conditional on the State Department’s role. When State Department officials are heavily involved, certainty
leads to peace; when marginalized, certainty is likely due to overprecision and leads to war.

Case studies of the Bay of Pigs and Iraq War assess implications that elude quantitative testing. Presidents marginalized diplomats, privileging CIA estimates in 1961 and Pentagon estimates in 2003. Each agency offered high-certainty estimates over political attributes affecting conflict outcomes: popular uprisings in Cuba and stability in post-Saddam Iraq. Overprecision is not a matter of hindsight as marginalized advisers invoked greater uncertainty before hostilities commenced.

Integrating behavioralist and rationalist approaches offers greater explanatory power in quantitative tests and provides insights into historical cases that are puzzling for extant theories. Moreover, the dissertation shows that certainty is not strictly welfare enhancing and flags policy conditions conducive to assessment errors and costly foreign policy blunders.
Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgments vii

1 Bargaining with Certainty 1
   1.1 Fallibility in International Politics ........................................... 1
   1.2 The Argument ............................................................................. 4
   1.3 Why Certainty? ........................................................................... 9
   1.4 Plan of the Dissertation .............................................................. 11

2 Theorizing Certainty, Leaders, and War 17
   2.1 Limited Information and Subjective Assessment .............................. 18
   2.2 War and Certainty without Error ................................................... 22
   2.3 War and Certainty with Error ........................................................ 24
   2.4 Causes of Overprecision ............................................................... 30
   2.5 Conclusion and Roadmap for Testing ............................................. 43

3 Quantitative Evidence for Overprecision in Bargaining 45
   3.1 Testing the Argument ................................................................. 45
   3.2 Observations, Documents, and Measurement .................................... 45
   3.3 Results ......................................................................................... 56
   3.4 Robustness and Alternative Explanations ....................................... 63
   3.5 Conclusion ................................................................................... 70

4 Bay of Pigs: Prospects for Protests 72
   4.1 Castro’s Consolidation and Bargaining Failure ................................. 72
   4.2 Communist Influence, Expropriation, and Sugar ............................... 77
   4.3 Overprecision at CIA and the Oval Office ...................................... 87
   4.4 Why Diplomats were Marginalized ............................................... 105
   4.5 Alternative Explanations .............................................................. 110
   4.6 Conclusion ................................................................................. 117

5 Iraq: Prewar Assessments of Postwar Stability 120
   5.1 Post-Saddam Stability and Bargaining Failure .................................. 120
   5.2 Regional Sway and Authoritarianism ............................................. 125
   5.3 Overprecision at the Pentagon and Oval Office .............................. 129
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Why Diplomats were Marginalized</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Alternative Explanations</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Conclusion</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Conclusion</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Theoretical Implications</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Policy Implications</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Appendix to Chapter 2</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Appendix to Chapter 3</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

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I won the lottery with my parents. I thank them (and my brother) for actively encouraging me in unspoken but unsubtle ways to exit a career path with a relatively clear trajectory but that sparked limited excitement in favor a path with the inverse conditions. Finally, I want to return to and thank Julie again. Trivially, I get the benefit of living with a better political scientist without the cost of an academic two-body problem. More importantly, thank you for sharing your life with me and letting me share mine with you.
1 | Bargaining with Certainty

1.1 Fallibility in International Politics

The “power to hurt” through military force shapes international politics by dictating which peaceful settlements are more attractive than war (Schelling 1966, p. 2). However, it is difficult for leaders to discern precisely how much “hurt” states can impose or tolerate and thus how unattractive military conflict is. Information limitations and the estimative challenges they generate permeate international politics. President Kennedy authorized an amphibious assault against Cuba in 1961 believing that anti-Castro popular uprisings would sprout in sympathy with the US-trained Brigade’s landing at the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy’s beliefs about the likelihood and scope of uprisings were pivotal for assessing the extent of “hurt” imposed on the Cuban regime: “ultimate success will depend upon political factors; i.e., a sizable popular uprising,” according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff[1]. CIA officials Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell shaped Kennedy’s beliefs, offering high-certainty estimates that a robust opposition lay in waiting with as much as 25% of the Cuban public ready to actively support anti-regime forces when provided a catalyst[2].

Reality shocked the President. Contrary to prevailing beliefs, there were no uprisings and few defections from Castro’s militia. Castro’s internal security forces, far more capable than Dulles and Bissell anticipated, arrested up to 200,000 potential dissidents in the 48 hours before the Brigade’s landing. Cuban forces routed the Brigade, in part because they did not

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1 Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, February 3, 1961, FRUS, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962, Document 35.

2 See Aguilar 1981 for declassified portions of the Taylor Committee’s official investigation of the Bay of Pigs. The quote is from p. 19-20.
have to quell uprisings. Castro’s hold on power only grew stronger as his forces killed 114 Brigade members (along with four American pilots) and captured another 1,189. Kennedy asked, “How could I have been so stupid?” More constructively, we might ask how could he have been so certain? Officials from the State Department and within CIA itself cautioned, before the operation, that there was insufficient information to warrant strong conclusions about the likelihood and magnitude of political uprisings. Yet the assessment process before the Bay of Pigs marginalized these advisers who typically participate in national security decision making. How did their marginalization affect the President’s estimative certainty? And in turn, how did the President’s estimative certainty affect his negotiating demands and the decision to employ military force?

When President George W. Bush authorized the Iraq War, he held strong beliefs about what political outcomes the United States could impose in post-Saddam Iraq, as well as the costs of doing so. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, along with senior officials in his office (e.g., Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith) and at US Central Command (e.g., Tommy Franks), advised the President that toppling Saddam would quickly yield the stable security environment requisite for installing US-preferred policies in Baghdad. Moreover, they anticipated that they could reorient extant Iraqi institutions—its ministries, regular army, and police force—allowing US and Coalition forces to liberate, not occupy, Iraq. Based in part on these high-certainty estimates, Bush authorized the war, deploying a force less than half the size recommended by military plans dating to the final years of the Clinton administration.

Saddam’s decisive defeat prompted mass looting, violence, and ongoing attacks against Coalition forces rather than the stability the President anticipated. Looters gutted Iraqi ministries, ripping out the wiring, plumbing, and furniture before setting many of them ablaze. Iraqi soldiers took off their uniforms and melted away. Chaos reigned and any goodwill toward US forces evaporated, rendering US plans to implement its preferred policies and rapidly handover governance responsibilities irrelevant. Feith (2008, p. 275) confesses these convulsions were “not anticipated with any precision.” Though true of the estimates the
Office of the Secretary of Defense provided, Feith downplays the uncertainty that many others noted. State Department officials warned that “Iraq will experience an enormous power vacuum” that might provide “an opportunity to engage in acts of killing, plunder, looting.” However, these officials casting doubt on the estimative certainty of others played a limited role in shaping the President’s beliefs. How did their marginalization affect Bush’s estimative certainty and, more importantly, how did his estimative certainty affect his bargaining posture and decision for war?

Existing scholarship suggests greater certainty about the expected outcome of war facilitates peace. Fully informed of what can be secured through force, adversaries forego conflict’s devastation and instead reach a mutually preferable peaceful settlement. But this widely prevalent and analytically powerful framework, typically referred to as the bargaining model of war, struggles to explain either the Bay of Pigs or the Iraq War. In each case the President held a high degree of certainty over expected conflict outcomes. Yet in each case this certainty contributed to bargaining failure, rather than success. This dissertation resolves the puzzle. It develops and tests a theory of the causes and consequences of certainty in the decision to use force. In brief, I theorize that the relationship between certainty and peace is conditional on certainty’s sources. Certainty is pacifying when it is warranted given the available information. However, contrary to prevalent theories of war, decision makers are often more certain, or more precise in their estimates, than the available information justifies. I incorporate these errors of overprecision, specify their generative conditions, and show that unwarranted certainty can increase the probability of war. The dissertation thus synthesizes behavioral psychology with rationalist approaches to generate new insights into leaders, their beliefs, their certainty, and the implications for international peace.

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3The quotes, respectively, are from Transparency and Anti-Corruption Measures Working Group, p. 72, The Future of Iraq Project, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 198; and Transitional Justice p. 29, The Future of Iraq Project, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 198.

4See Fey (N.d.b) for caveats relevant to informational accounts of war.
1.2 The Argument

Uncertainty is pervasive in international politics. Clausewitz, the famed Prussian general and theorist, deemed war the “province of chance.” Beyond the often stochastic character of war, decision makers confront inherent uncertainty over an adversary’s intentions. Pessimistic about these intentions, leaders take actions to bolster their own security. Tragically, doing so may cause the opponent to itself grow more fearful of the state’s intentions. Such security dilemmas generate ratcheting actions that increase the risk of war (Jervis 1978).

Yet another form of uncertainty pertains to an adversary’s military capabilities (or competence) and its resolve to fight (or willingness to bear costs). This dissertation addresses this form of uncertainty. Existing rationalist theories—the bargaining model of war—conclude that this form of uncertainty, coupled with leaders’ incentives to misrepresent their strength, can cause war. Reaching diplomatic settlements hinges upon the ability of actors with conflicting preferences to identify negotiated outcomes that are preferable to suffering the costs of conflict (Schelling 1966, Blainey 1988, Fearon 1995, Powell 1999, Fey and Ramsay 2011, Slantchev and Tarar 2011). Uncertainty arising from private information about military capabilities or resolve obscures an opponent’s expected value to fighting and thus the range of bargaining settlements that are preferable to using force.

Rationalist theories contend that the strategic environment—the actors, their preferences, their potential strategies, the available information, and actors’ beliefs—dictate state behavior. Crucially, the available information determines actors’ beliefs. When the information is ample and high quality, decision makers are certain about their opponent’s characteristics. When the information is incomplete or limited, decision makers are uncertain. All strategic choices are then contingent on these beliefs. Leaders, by assumption, do not make estimative errors but merely internalize the strategic context and behave accordingly. Of course this simplifying setup is intentional, not an oversight. Holding information processing errors constant by precluding them allows scholars to isolate the independent effect of variation in the informational environment on state behavior in bargaining and
ultimately war. These efforts have been enormously fruitful, producing a compelling logic as to why states would ever engage in such costly, ex post inefficient, behavior.

However, prevailing accounts are in part unsatisfying. They conclude that leaders (and their advisers) are interchangeable. A President Gore would behave as President Bush did. They assume estimates perfectly reflect the available information. This contention is difficult to reconcile with many cases of crisis behavior, such as the Bay of Pigs and Iraq War. In both instances there was limited available information about the adversary, a reality that some advisers recognized and expressed in the form of greater uncertainty. Others within these administrations, however, provided high-certainty estimates that the President adopted. As noted, all strategic choices—such as how generous to be at the negotiating table—follow from an actor’s beliefs. This dissertation aims to take these beliefs seriously, recognizing that leader’s beliefs are not dictated by an objective information environment but rather are determined through subjective processes open to human fallibility. My approach harkens back to older studies explicating decision-maker assessments (Jervis 1976; Snyder and Diesing 1977; George 1980; Lebow 1981; Khong 1992) and contributes to newer efforts elucidating beliefs and their formation (Press 2005; Saunders 2011; Yarhi-Milo 2014), all while situating the resulting beliefs in a systematic framework that illustrates how leader beliefs underpin strategic choices.

Behavioralist research in psychology and economics extensively documents a number of ways in which individual behavior systematically deviates from rationalist predictions, especially in the realm of information processing (for example, Simon (1955); Kahneman (2011)). Overconfidence is considered one of the most widespread and damaging of these many biases (Kahneman 2011; Mannes and Moore 2013). Among the multiple forms of overconfidence, overprecision is the most prevalent and persistent but also the least understood. Overprecision is a perceptual error whereby individuals overstate their degree of certainty. For instance, when respondents are asked to estimate a quantity of interest and provide 90% confidence intervals around that estimate, those intervals contain the true value of the quantity approximately 40% of the time (Alpert and Raiffa 1982; Teigen and Jorgensen 2005; Moore
and Healy 2008). Scholars have replicated this excess certainty result across contexts and protocols (Moore, Carter, and Yang Forthcoming). Moreover, overprecision has meaningful real-world consequences, affecting investors’ financial decisions, doctors’ medical diagnoses, and decision-makers’ interest in hearing dissenting opinions. More broadly, Tetlock (2005) exposes the estimative limitations of political “experts.”

Despite the elevated stakes associated with conflict, I demonstrate that elites are susceptible to overprecision as well. I incorporate overprecision into a bargaining model and show that greater estimative certainty can increase the probability of war, contrary to the existing accounts. A high-certainty estimate precludes extreme possibilities—such as the opponent being very strong or very weak. Precluding these possibilities can cause leaders to make more onerous demands in negotiations. More onerous demands, in turn, increase the likelihood that opponents reject such bargains which leads to war. The error of excess certainty is distinct from the error of excess optimism that others have studied (Blainey 1988; Johnson 2004).

Noting that leaders are susceptible to making errors of overprecision naturally raises the question as to when they are most likely to do so. When is certainty likely to be warranted versus ill-placed? Put differently, when are leaders more likely to recognize how little the available information tells them? Recognition of this limitation depends on the substance of estimation, becoming more likely when individuals consider all factors that affect the estimated quantity—the expected value of war. War’s expected value depends on military attributes (e.g., opponent capabilities, their competence, and a net assessment of how opposing sides’ forces interact) and political attributes (e.g., opponent resolve or the

5See Mannes and Moore (2013) for the relevant details.

6Unwarranted certainty due to overprecision implies a baseline ‘truth’ exists against which to compare estimates. Identifying overprecision ex ante is problematic as the true distribution is unknown. Even ex post this task is difficult as revealed outcomes that differ from estimate means could be indicative of a bad draw rather than a flawed assessment. Others propose strategies to work around this dilemma (Johnson and Tierney 2011, footnote 7), which I adopt in part for the case studies in Chapters 4 and 5. To strengthen those efforts, I also posit causes of greater certainty and theorize the conditional effect of more certainty arising from specific causes on conflict propensity. This design focuses on specifying the differential consequences of certainty rather than direct assessments of overprecision. Quantitative tests in Chapter 3 follow this approach.
difficulty of translating military gains into the political objectives for which a conflict was fought). An adversary’s military and political attributes both likely entail uncertainty due to a dearth of available information. Ignoring or failing to recognize the attendant uncertainty in either one can produce overprecise estimates.

Leaders ideally form their beliefs about adversary attributes by tapping advisers with relevant expertise and diverse information sources and opinions. When optimally implemented, leader certainty will reflect the informational environment with certainty increasing as the available information is more ample or higher quality, thus conforming with rationalist expectations. Whether estimates are overprecise depends upon the information leaders solicit from their advisers. A division of labor across bureaucracies in foreign and security policy generates comparative specialization. Each bureaucracy develops expertise and substantive points of emphasis that are frequently non-overlapping and privileges certain forms or sources of information. If leaders tap into this array of expertise and information then resulting assessments approximate the rationalist benchmark. However, assessment processes frequently fall short of this optimum. A failure to solicit diverse opinions based on diverse information sources generates overprecision. Partially due to demands for secrecy, Kennedy failed to solicit views from the full breadth of his advisers, instead relying on the advice (or signals) that Dulles and Bissell provided. Because of breakdowns in the inter-agency coordination process, the Pentagon’s views dominated Bush’s assessments.

Marginalization or exclusion of pertinent advisory viewpoints causes leaders to form overprecise estimates. Such marginalization is most likely for those tasked with providing information about an adversary’s political, as opposed to military, attributes that affect war’s expected value. Leaders are typically scrupulous about acquiring information on an adversary’s military capabilities and competence before authorizing force. In contrast, they often fail to collect information on an adversary’s cohesion or resolve and the post-conflict political landscape, even though both factors are determinative of a conflict’s likely resolution. Kennedy relied on a narrow set of advisers to form beliefs about anti-Castro political uprisings. Schlesinger recounts, “The ‘need-to-know’ standard—i.e., that no one should be
told about the project unless it becomes operationally necessary—thus had the idiotic effect of excluding much of the expertise of the government” (Schlesinger 1965, p. 248). Bush relied on a narrow set of advisers to form beliefs about the US ability to transform combat gains into the political objectives for which the Iraq War was fought in the first place.

Assessment processes generate overprecise estimates when they marginalize advisers tasked with analyzing an opponent’s political attributes. In expectation, diplomats are the advisers most likely to invoke these political considerations. In the US context, this refers to senior State Department officials with direct lines of communication to the president. This is not to say that other agencies ignore political considerations. They employ many analysts which insures they do not. But they are more likely to do so at the senior level when advising the executive. Thus bureaucracies are pivotal in shaping foreign policy choices in crisis bargaining but in a way that international relations scholars generally ignore. These agencies affect crisis behavior through the information they provide, rather than through parochial preference divergences. More concretely, diplomats are crucial in estimative processes because of the substantive issues they emphasize, information they can offer on those issues, and their recognition of the attendant uncertainty, rather than due to hypothetically dovish preferences. In my account, bureaucracies are not simply political actors jockeying for influence but instead are repositories of specialized expertise that influence whether executives have access to all pertinent information. To clarify the scope, I specify when assessment processes are prone to overprecision, highlighting marginalization. As with all scholarship, the causal chain is necessarily abbreviated. I do not specify the causes of marginalization, though I address the obvious selection concerns and offer inductive insights into this matter. The psychological tendency toward overprecision is crucial to the theory, but the “demand” for overprecision—for example, why a leader may seek certainty—is left for future research.

In sum, the relationship between certainty and war is conditional on certainty’s sources. Consistent with bargaining models of war, leader certainty leads to peace when it is appropriate given the available information. However, certainty often arises due to perceptual
errors of leaders and advisers who overestimate the precision of available information. These errors of overprecision are common when decision makers downplay the importance of political, as opposed to military, factors in determining conflict outcomes, which is likely when estimation processes marginalize elites who oversee a state’s international diplomacy. In such cases, greater leader certainty can increase bargaining demands and consequently the likelihood of war.

1.3 Why Certainty?

War retains a unique destructive capacity. Individuals’ purposive actions kill others and expend or destroy tremendous resources. Whether its prevalence is waning (Pinker 2011) or not (Braumoeller 2013), war continues to pose a latent threat to human existence that few, if any, other phenomena can rival. Despite millennia of efforts, unpacking war’s causes remains a pressing objective for both scholars and practitioners. Shining a light on the estimative certainty of consequential decision makers contributes to this joint project.

More tangibly, why should we care about certainty’s causes and consequences in the decision for war? What contributions does such a focus produce? First, it forces us to take beliefs seriously. As noted, all strategic choices depend upon an actor’s beliefs about the consequences of those choices. Standard rationalist conceptions of incomplete information assume that the range of an adversary’s attributes—e.g., its resolve—and the associated probabilities are known. However, in actual decisions of war and peace, the range is not prescribed in an identifiable way; instead, those tasked with making high-stakes strategic choices must estimate it. Bringing certainty to the fore illustrates benefits to incorporating behavioralist (or psychological) insights into rationalist models. This is not a repudiation of the bargaining account of war as it is the bargaining model’s clarity that reveals the importance of the issue. Rather, it is an effort to account for and specify when individual behavior is (un)likely to approximate rationalist predictions. Doing so is in the spirit of Fearon’s (1995, p. 409) conclusion that after developing rationalist mechanisms for war,
“bounded rationality may appear a more important cause of disagreement” and follows a suggestion from Lake (2010) that “[a] marriage of behavioral and bargaining theory promises to be more powerful than either alone.” Ultimately, a theory accounting for overprecision shows that asymmetric information is more problematic than previously suggested. Incomplete information can generate war through the standard risk-return tradeoff identified in bargaining models. I show it can also generate war due to elites failing to grasp how little information they actually have. A leader’s inability to recognize the incompleteness of available information may produce unwarranted certainty which can increase conflict likelihood.

Second, a study of certainty and overprecision specifies when such errors are most likely to occur. Many scholars incorporate insights from psychology, such as an array of heuristics, emotions, and decision-making tendencies, into theories of war (Jervis 1976, Janis 1982, Levy 1992, Biddle 2004, McDermott 2004, Johnson 2004, Mercer 2005, Rathbun 2007, Kahneman and Renshon 2007, Johnson and Tierney 2011, Rapport 2012, Rathbun, Kertzer, and Paradis n.d.). However, they often do so by positing that an estimative error occurs without specifying when it is most likely to occur. Without context or conditionality, such errors offer explanations for why war might occur at all but not for why war might occur in a particular instance. I avoid this limitation, giving ex ante predictions about the causes of overprecision.

Third, studying certainty brings leaders and their senior advisers to the forefront. A limited but growing literature places the locus of analysis at the individual level (Chiozza and Goemans 2011, Saunders 2011, Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015, Dafoe and Caughey 2016), rather than the structural or domestic institutional levels that dominated decades of scholarship on international politics. This dissertation contributes to these efforts while also revealing the importance of a leader’s close advisers. Advisers shape leader beliefs.

Understanding estimative tendencies in the latter profits from a theory incorporating the

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7Prospect theory is a notable exception, though defining reference points is a non-trivial challenge for producing ex ante predictions.

8See Saunders (n.d.) for a related systematic analysis of advisers’ effects.
former. Doing so also contributes to the study of bureaucratic politics during crises, which is rich in case studies (Allison 1971; Janis 1982; Marsh 2014), but relatively impoverished in generalized theory and testing.

Fourth, there is a clear policy implication. Estimative errors occur even when the stakes are life and death. This paper specifies when leaders and advisers are most prone to making these errors. Downplaying the importance of understanding an opponent’s political attributes by marginalizing those with relevant expertise from the deliberative process increases the risk of these costly misperceptions. Errors of this form account for some of the great failures of US foreign policy in the past half century. Avoiding future costly mistakes may hinge on the ability of leaders and their advisers to recognize the full spectrum of factors that complicate efforts to predict the consequences of using military force.

Finally, and most basically, a theory of certainty allowing for estimative errors does a better job explaining international conflict behavior. As described below, accounting for overprecision improves the explanatory power of statistical models of military conflict. Additionally, the contentsion provides qualitative insights into cases that are otherwise puzzling based on extant theories.

1.4 Plan of the Dissertation

Does certainty cause war or peace? Confronting the inherent complexity of international politics and armed with only limited information, what determines how certain leaders are? This dissertation mixes theory, quantitative tests using an original data set of declassified security documents, and historical case studies to answer these questions.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical argument. A simple canonical bargaining model serves as a point of departure (Fearon 1995). Beginning with a strictly rationalist world without estimative error, I follow Reed (2003) and show that certainty leads to peace. Next, I incorporate overprecision errors such that an adversary’s resolve is drawn from a given distribution but the estimating actor mistakenly believes the adversary’s resolve
is drawn from a narrower, lower variance, distribution. Once allowing for overprecision, certainty is no longer strictly associated with peace and can actually increase the likelihood of war. The chapter then turns to the causes of overprecision, specifying the actors—leaders and advisers—and the information aggregation process. Contrary to Allison’s (1971) Bureaucratic Politics Model, advisers do not exploit crises to advance parochial interests. Instead, sufficient preference alignment allows for credible communication (advising). Rather than “where you stand depends on where you sit,” I argue that “what you consider depends on where you sit.” Diplomats are more likely to draw on alternative information sources and highlight uncertainty around adversaries’ political attributes. The risk of overprecision grows when leaders marginalize their input. Putting it together, when assessment processes incorporate diplomats, certainty is likely to reflect quality information and generate peace as predicted in bargaining models. When decision processes exclude diplomats, certainty is likely due to overprecision and can cause conflict.

Chapters 3 through 5 turn to testing and illustrating the theory’s empirical implications. Bargaining theory’s insight linking asymmetric information to war has achieved widespread and growing prominence in contemporary accounts of conflict. Yet the empirical implications have eluded systematic testing as measuring certainty poses a challenge. Despite the difficulty, scholars recognize the importance of finding a way to capture beliefs and certainty (Morrow 1989; Slantchev 2004; Gartzke and Poast n.d.). Chapter 3 addresses the challenge by developing a measure of how US presidents and senior advisers evaluated the certainty attendant to possible conflicts during the Cold War. Focusing on elites captures estimated certainty at the locus of foreign policy decision making. I collect declassified security documents—memos to and from the president as well as transcripts from meetings the president attended—from 61 US crises during the Cold War for a total corpus of greater than 1,100 texts. A simple automated text analysis employing a dictionary of words connoting uncertainty generates measures of certainty at the speaker, bureaucracy, and crisis

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9I hold the mean fixed throughout. My substantive focus is overprecision (or unwarranted certainty), not overoptimism in the sense that the mean of the estimate is biased.
levels. After validating the measure, I use it in quantitative tests that demonstrate the conditional relationship between certainty and peace. When the deliberative process includes diplomats (State Department officials), certainty is associated with peace. When processes marginalize diplomats, certainty no longer correlates with peace and can actually increase the probability of conflict. Extensive robustness tests show that (1) selection issues over when processes are likely to marginalize diplomats cannot explain the results, (2) overprecision persists across a leader’s tenure—i.e., leaders do not simply learn their way out of estimative errors, (3) pessimism, as opposed to certainty, does not explain the results, (4) findings hold when accounting for the small sample size, and (5) there is no evidence that diplomats strategically invoke uncertainty to advance a bureaucratic interest in pursuing diplomacy.

Chapter 3’s quantitative tests corroborate theoretical implications consistent with the theory. That said, these tests are ill-suited for evaluating the full range of theoretical contentions. For instance, the quantitative measure of certainty does not in itself reveal overprecision errors. Instead, Chapter 3 looks for downstream implications of overprecision. Qualitative case studies in Chapters 4 and 5 fill this lacuna by reconstructing the available information, the president’s estimative certainty, and the estimative certainty of advisers marginalized during the interagency process. It is trivially easy and non-constructive to deride estimative errors with the benefit of hindsight. Instead, the objective is to establish these were estimative errors based on the available information at the time they were made. More broadly, the cases illustrate the full causal chain posited by the theory while evaluating plausible alternative explanations. My intention is to complement the quantitative inferences, not to replicate them with an even smaller sample size.

Chapter 4 studies the Bay of Pigs operation using primary and secondary sources. After establishing the preliminaries—the stakes of the bilateral dispute, its historical context, and the presence of explicit and implicit bargaining efforts—I evaluate each step in the theory. First, I show that Cuba’s political attributes were essential to US estimates of what could be secured through force. Political uprisings would dictate the Brigade’s prospects. Second,
senior CIA officials held a high-certainty estimate about the scope of uprisings. Third, this estimate held sway with Kennedy. Fourth, others, particularly those from the State Department and the intelligence side of CIA, were more uncertain about uprisings, recognizing the dual trends in Cuba between growing disaffection with Castro and his growing internal security apparatus. Fifth, I establish that the CIA and Kennedy estimate was overprecise both ex ante—which is evident given that others expressed greater uncertainty—and plausibly ex post—given the realized outcome was worse than even the worst-case scenario. I also preclude the alternative explanation that Kennedy’s certainty was consistent with a strictly Bayesian estimation process. Sixth, I link the overprecise estimates to onerous bargaining demands—e.g., Castro’s repudiation of Communism, prompt compensation to expropriated US businesses, and the complete suspension of Cuba’s annual sugar quota. Finally, I document the State Department’s marginalization and demonstrate that it was not due to its preexisting hostility to the operation. Instead, demands for secrecy, State’s disappointingly lethargic pace of action, and Rusk’s own quiet demeanor all limited the department’s input.

Beyond illustrating the theory’s mechanisms, the case provides a new viewpoint on the “perfect failure” by (1) situating the operation in a strategic context that emphasizes why the operation occurred at all, rather than why it failed so spectacularly and (2) the importance of administration beliefs regarding popular uprisings.

Chapter 5 turns to the Iraq War. Doing so entails a tradeoff: the case illustrates the theory’s applicability beyond the Cold War but the emphasis on current relevance comes at the expense of access to many primary sources. I use original documents when available but otherwise rely on memoirs, after action studies from the US military, and outsider accounts. The analytic structure follows that of Chapter 4. First, I establish the importance of Iraq’s political attributes in shaping US estimates of what political outcomes could be secured through force—e.g., an Iraqi foreign policy that did not threaten US partners in the region and a regime that did not violate its population’s human rights. Achieving this outcome at a non-exorbitant cost depended on US estimates regarding the ease with which it could restore security post-Saddam and rely on the existing state apparatus to quickly transition authority
to an Iraqi government. Second, Rumsfeld, along with Wolfowitz, Perle, Feith, Franks, and others, held high-certainty estimates regarding the prospects for postwar security and the governance handover. Third, President Bush adopted this estimate. Fourth, other advisory channels, particularly the State Department, expressed more uncertainty, pointing to a lack of quality intelligence on Iraq. Fifth, Bush’s estimate was overprecise. Again, this follows from the contrasting low-certainty estimates that others provided and, arguably, from the realized outcome which exceeded the President’s most pessimistic expectations. To argue instead that Bush’s beliefs conformed with Bayesian expectations requires heroic assumptions, detailed in the chapter. Sixth, the overprecise estimate contributed to Bush’s stark ultimatum, demanding that Saddam and his sons vacate Iraq. Finally, I explain why officials marginalized diplomats in the prewar study of postwar Iraq. Again, it was not because these officials necessarily opposed the war—neither Powell nor Armitage explicitly did so. Instead, a breakdown in the interagency process (including toxic Defense-State relations) and idiosyncrasies of Powell’s own disposition caused the department’s marginalization. The case contributes to a nascent literature offering strategic explanations for the Iraq War \cite{Lake2010,Debs and Monteiro2014,Coe2011} by providing a theoretically motivated explanation for the estimative errors that drove the administration’s strategic choices. Moreover, the study draws attention to the estimative failings surrounding post-Saddam Iraq which are often overshadowed by the higher profile but arguably less egregious estimative failings surrounding Iraq weapons programs \cite{Jervis2010}.

Chapter 6 concludes by drawing out implications for theories of conflict as well as bargaining more generally. Assessment certainty is not always welfare enhancing, perhaps contrary to our typical intuition. Overprecision highlights the danger of certainty as well as asymmetric information. The latter induces conflict through both the typical risk-return tradeoff and also when decision makers fail to recognize how asymmetric the information really is. Additionally, I (1) highlight the importance of adversary attributes that are frequently under theorized, such as the ease with which military gains are translated into political objectives and (2) offer IR scholars a theory of bureaucratic politics that rests on information provision.
rather than preference divergence. I finish with implications for policy. While noting the inherent difficulty that high-stakes, low-information, estimative challenges pose to the individuals tasked with making them, there is obvious room for improvement. Predictively, the dissertation flags conditions most conducive to costly estimative errors. High-certainty estimates absent careful consideration of an adversary’s political characteristics have produced devastating failures in US foreign policy. Closely held deliberations that curtail the flow of information are particularly susceptible to these shortcomings. Prescriptively, certainty is not an end in itself. The objective is to recognize the extent of uncertainty present, not eliminate it. Such a shift in perspective ought to lead practitioners toward reconsidering what status quo conditions are acceptable given the often vast uncertainties associated with the counterfactual of war.
Uncertainty is a central explanation for international conflict. If only we could be more certain about an adversary—its capabilities or resolve—then perhaps we could avoid war and its devastation. When certain of an opponent’s strength or resolve, we know precisely how far we can push them in negotiations and go no further. Uncertainty due to limited information about the opponent obscures this limit. When uncertain, war can rationally occur if a state expects an opponent is weak or unresolved when in fact it is strong or resolute. Indeed, asymmetric information coupled with incentives to misrepresent is considered one of the primary causes of war. Information asymmetries can pertain to levels of resolve or willingness to bear costs (Fearon 1994, 1995; Schultz 1999), or capabilities affecting the probability of victory in conflict (Blainey 1988; Reed 2003; Smith and Stam 2006; Slantchev and Tarar 2011; Fey and Ramsay 2011).

This account’s simple and compelling logic rests on a strong assumption that the strategic environment determines state behavior. Individuals, such as leaders, merely internalize this environment and behave accordingly. Uncertainty, as perceived by individuals, perfectly captures the true uncertainty present. If all available information rightly leads one to conclude an enemy has between 1,000 and 2,000 tanks with an equal chance of any value in that range, then leaders inevitably reach this conclusion.

Put differently, the predominant theories of uncertainty and war assume leaders are flawless information processors. This simplifying assumption assures tractability while still providing a great deal of analytical insight. However, it is somewhat unsatisfying given the visible and surely influential role individual leaders and advisers play in shaping international
politics. A typical counter-factual consideration illustrates the point. Did the strategic context make the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq inevitable or might an alternative Supreme Court ruling in favor of Gore have changed the way bargaining and war unfolded? Though impossible to answer definitively, the line of reasoning brings the role of individuals and variation in their information processing, and preferences, to the fore.

Uncertainty is key to explaining war, even more so after incorporating heterogeneity in information processing. But the uncertainty that matters may be of a different form from what prior accounts suggest. It is not uncertainty strictly due to limited information available in the strategic context that matters, but rather how individuals perceive this uncertainty. These two concepts are identical when individuals do not make perceptual errors but differ when they do.

The remainder of this chapter illustrates how and when these information processing errors matter. First, I clarify concepts related to uncertainty, probability, and overprecision. Second, I present uncertainty’s effect on war when uncertainty is purely due to the strategic environment. A classic formal model of bargaining and war serves as a point of departure. Third, I incorporate overprecision into this framework to illustrate how individual errors alter the relationship between certainty and war. Fourth, I specify when these overprecision errors are most likely to occur with an emphasis on how an adviser’s substantive remit affects the informational sources and content she draws upon when advising the executive.

2.1 Limited Information and Subjective Assessment

Before presenting the theory, I clarify terms and discuss estimative errors with a focus on overprecision. Consider a probability distribution for a variable of interest that affects bargaining prospects, such as costs or casualties in conflict. Individuals with limited information—such as leaders making decisions about the use of force—must formulate their own subjective distributions for this variable. For instance, will the enemy capitulate after suffering 100 fatalities, 100,000 fatalities, or anything in between? We can describe this sub-
jective assessment by its variance and its mean. The former summarizes the uncertainty of the estimate and is the central concern for this dissertation. In contrast to conventional accounts which argue an estimate’s uncertainty is a function of only the available information, I suggest it is a function of both the level—quality and quantity—of available information and an estimator’s perceptual errors.

On terminology, I use uncertainty and risk in a non-Knightian sense (Knight 1921). Scenarios with probabilities less than one assigned to outcomes entail uncertainty and therefore risk. The probabilities may themselves be subjective—indeed, incorporating and understanding errors in these subjective assessments is a central goal of the project—but are not intrinsically unknowable. Uncertainty over the probabilities is thus epistemic rather than aleatory.

It is unlikely decision-makers conceive of problems in terms of continuous distributions with exact means and variances. However, any estimate, whether of an opponent’s military capabilities or of a war’s outcome, implicitly constitutes a probability distribution. Consider assessments of how the Iraq War would unfold. Though some anticipated a protracted conflict (Shanker 2007; Bennett and Stam 2006), these views were downplayed. Secretary Rumsfeld expected the war “could last six days, six weeks. I doubt six months” (Rumsfeld 2003). This constitutes a probability distribution that perhaps had a long tail, but where the vast majority of the likelihood is placed around the short duration side of the outcome spectrum, rendering a high-certainty assessment. All estimates entail probability distributions and therefore a measure of uncertainty.

As the above example makes clear, estimates are not objectively given but arise from subjective processes that are prone to perceptual errors. Some conflict scholars incorporate insights from cognitive psychology, such as an array of heuristics and shortcomings that affect decision making (Jervis 1976; Biddle 2004; Mercer 2005; Rathbun 2007; Kahneman and Renshon 2007; Johnson and Tierney 2011). Few formal models of conflict permit estimative error. Kurizaki (Forthcoming) allows for perceptual error in crisis bargaining such that states misperceive whether an opponent issues a threat. This approach leaves the sources of
misperception unspecified and focuses on threat estimation rather than estimation pertinent to bargaining. Others address subjective estimation by endogenizing beliefs through inter-temporal preference shifts (Minozzi 2013) or through non-common priors (Smith and Stam 2004). Mitzen and Schweller (2011) emphasize misplaced certainty due to affective sources as a cause of conflict that operates through security dilemmas as opposed to bargaining breakdowns. I similarly theorize the pernicious consequences of misplaced certainty, though the error emanates from a different source and conflict through a different logic.

2.1.1 Overprecision

Unwarranted certainty refers to an individual’s belief that his information is better than it actually is, which produces overprecise estimates. I focus on this form of bias, as opposed to alternative forms of irrationality, because decades of studies show that overprecision errors are prevalent and persistent (Tversky 1974; Alpert and Raiffa 1982). When asked for an estimate with 90% confidence intervals, these intervals only contain the true answer 30% to 50% of the time (Alpert and Raiffa 1982; Soll and Klayman 2004; Teigen and Jorgensen 2005; Moore and Healy 2008). Alternative strategies for eliciting estimative certainty produce similarly overprecise responses (Mannes and Moore 2013). Moreover, overprecision is not subject to reversals which can be elicited with other forms of overconfidence. Rather, overprecision is the most durable form of overconfident estimation error. When errors of precision occur, they are excessively certain with single-point estimates representing the extreme case. Put simply, “(almost) everyone exhibits overprecision (almost) all the time” (Ortoleva and Snowberg 2015).

Overprecision is a form of overconfidence. Overconfidence is a broad term that subsumes multiple phenomena including overoptimism and overprecision (Moore and Healy 2008). The variance reflects an estimate’s precision, a distribution’s mean reflects an estimate’s opti-

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1 See Haran and Moore (2010) on mitigating overprecision errors. I am skeptical that anything akin to these methods employed in the laboratory are relevant to national security decision-making processes.

2 See Moore, Carter, and Yang (Forthcoming) on potential causes of overprecision.
mism. While optimism is critically important, I put aside its causes and consequences in favor of studying certainty, which has a less developed literature pertaining to international security and has less immediate implications. This separation is justifiable because overoptimism and overprecision do not imply one another (Moore and Healy 2008; Ortoleva and Snowberg 2015).

There is strong evidence that overprecision is not limited to convenience samples—such as a pool of college undergraduates. Despite the higher stakes in decisions of war, elites and experts are susceptible to making estimative errors (Tetlock 2005; Friedman and Zeckhauser 2012). For instance, CIA Director Allen Dulles spoke to President Kennedy preceding the Bay of Pigs invasion, saying “I stood right here at Ike’s desk and told him I was certain our Guatemalan operation would succeed, and Mr. President, the prospects for this plan are even better than they were for that one” (Sorensen 1965, p. 296). Carter administration officials were certain that opposition groups during the Iranian Revolution were weak and only a temporary nuisance as mere months before the Shah’s fall they agreed to sell arms to the extant regime for force projection in the Persian Gulf. Observers of crisis decision making are often troubled by the lack of reflection and careful analysis exhibited in the process. When debating using force to assist dissident factions in the Dominican Republic following Trujillo’s assassination, Under Secretary of State Bowles was dismayed by others’ cavalier assessments about the balance of forces, suggesting “we had no real knowledge of who the dissidents were, their views, or depth of influence … and the next order of business was to find out what was going on.” Overprecision occurs even when the stakes are enormous.

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5Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Bowles), June 3, 1961, FRUS, Volume XII, American Republics, 1961-1963, Document 310.
2.2 War and Certainty without Error

Does certainty cause war or peace? I first address the question when assuming the extent of uncertainty is objectively known—that is, individuals’ estimates perfectly reflect the amount of uncertainty as dictated by the information environment. This follows the typical rationalist account which assumes that actors know the probability distribution for variables of interest such as an enemy’s resolve or its capabilities. While a state might invest in intelligence gathering and thus get more information about the distribution (Arena and Wolford 2012), such a framework treats the resulting distribution as objective. The subsequent section incorporates overprecision errors.

Consider a canonical model as a point of departure (Fearon 1995). Two states $A$ and $B$ bargain over the allocation of a contested continuously divisible resource $R$, such as territory or a slate of policies, with a value normalized to equal one. For expositional clarity I adopt the simplest bargaining protocol. In a non-iterated interaction, $A$ makes proposals (retaining $x$ of 1) and $B$ either accepts or rejects with the latter resulting in war. War is a costly winner-take-all lottery with $A$ winning with probability $p$. Both sides suffer war costs (arising from casualties, destruction of the contested resource, or a negative reputation hit), $c_A$ and $c_B$ respectively, if conflict occurs.

With asymmetric information, $B$’s reservation value—its expected payoff from war—is unknown to the proposing state. The proposing state’s uncertainty about its enemy’s expected war outcome can arise from uncertainty about the latter’s resolve or war costs ($c_B$) or its military capabilities which affect the conflict outcome ($p$). Placing uncertainty over either parameter has similar implications for my purposes (though see Fey and Ramsay (2011)). I model the uncertainty over the opponent’s resolve. When excluding the possibility of perceptual errors, uncertainty indicates that $B$’s resolve falls somewhere in a known range of possible levels given by a prescribed cumulative distribution function $F(z)$ which is

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6 I focus on asymmetric information and put aside alternative rationalist explanations for war, such as shifting power and commitment problems. See Wolford, Reiter, and Carrubba (2011) on integrating commitment problems into models with asymmetric information.
More concretely, this could mean a state is unsure of an enemy’s tolerance for fatalities. The well-known result from this framework is that the proposing state A balances a risk-return tradeoff, leaving some positive ex ante probability that the enemy B rejects the offer and war occurs. The proposing state may make offers that satisfy an enemy with a moderate tolerance for battlefield casualties but risks war if the enemy has a high casualty tolerance. A bargain satisfying the moderately resolved enemy is preferable for the proposer compared to bargains satisfying a highly committed opponent but leaves a higher risk of war—hence the risk-return tradeoff.

When the distribution of possible enemy resolve levels is fixed and known, war occurs when the opponent happens to be a strong type, which is modeled as random and impedes empirical assessment of this central explanation for war. I follow Reed (2003) in deriving a result which provides some leverage on the problem. Rather than assuming enemy resolve is drawn from a fixed distribution $F(z)$, allow the variance of the distribution to vary while holding the mean constant. That is, uncertainty differs across cases. Rather than having uncertainty over an opponent’s resolve such that $c_B$ is distributed, say, uniformly between 0 and $1 - c_B \sim U(0,1)$—imagine that greater information in another crisis allows the assessor to restrict this such that $c_B \sim U(0.2,0.8)$.

Varying the amount of certainty—that is, the variance—reveals that the probability of

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7Results are no different with a discrete distribution but the intuition is less clear.

8The result follows from A’s limited information about B’s characteristics and B’s incentives to misrepresent those characteristics.

9Holding the mean constant best approximates different crises with varying degrees of certainty rather than a fixed crisis with learning occurring. As in Reed (2003), a fixed mean makes the model ill-suited for capturing learning dynamics except in the narrow case where signals of type all match the mean value of the initial distribution. Fey (N.d.b) models intra-crisis (or intra-war) learning dynamics, showing that peace is not monotonically associated with greater certainty when the mean is not fixed. Fey (N.d.a) demonstrates that one can vary the structure of prior beliefs such that comparative statics do not yield sharp predictions. In the absence of theory as to when different distributions are likely to obtain, I hold the family of the prior constant across crises—e.g., they are all uniform, or beta—while varying the uncertainty (variance). Whether plausible or not, this approach offers at least a first step toward taking beliefs seriously.

10As in Fearon (1995), the results are restricted to distributions with nondecreasing hazard rates $f(z) / F(z)$, which holds for all uniform distributions and all beta distributions with shape parameters greater than or equal to one (Fudenberg and Tirole 1991; Bagnoli and Bergstrom 1989). In the Appendix I demonstrate the logic analytically with a uniform distribution and with a beta distribution via simulations.
war is decreasing in certainty. Low certainty gives rise to the risk-reward tradeoff and attendant positive probability of war. Increased certainty minimizes the tradeoff and converges to the complete information case where the probability of war is zero. Figure 2.1’s lower line plots the comparative static.  

\[ \text{Hypothesis 1a: The ex ante probability of conflict declines as the certainty of the assessment increases, provided there is no perceptual error.} \]

2.3 War and Certainty with Error

Departing from the traditional rationalist framework, I now introduce perceptual error in the form of unwarranted certainty. Rather than have opponent attributes prescribed by a known distribution, actors must subjectively estimate this distribution. Recognizing this subjectivity shifts the question of when war occurs from the realm of randomness—do we happen to face a strong opponent—to one of ignorance, where the the range of how strong an opponent might be is itself unknown (Gelman 2006).

2.3.1 Modeling Overprecision

I model unwarranted certainty by incorporating error to player A’s estimate of B’s resolve. Let \( \theta \in [0, 1] \) indicate the error in A’s perception such that \( \theta \) represents the percentage uncertainty reduction, in the form of shrinking range boundaries, from the unbiased estimate of B’s resolve. For instance, if an appropriate reading of the intelligence on B’s cost tolerance indicates that \( c_B \) is distributed uniformly between 0.3 and 0.7, then \( \theta = 0.5 \) indicates A perceives that \( c_B \) is distributed uniformly between 0.4 and 0.6. A optimizes

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11Parameter values are as follows: \( c_B \) converges from \( c_B \sim U(0.05, 0.55) \) to \( c_B = 0.3 \) with \( c_A = 0.2 \) and \( p = 0.4 \). As shown in the Appendix, the equilibrium demand \( \pi^* \) is decreasing in uncertainty until the probability of war reaches zero, then increasing afterward as the minimum possible \( c_B \) increases.

12See Kurizaki (Forthcoming) for a related approach.

13In the beta distribution, we can think of \( \theta \) as reducing variance.

14The mean of the overprecise distribution matches that of the correctly assessed distribution. Again, the focus is on the role of certainty and not optimism. Overoptimism’s war-promoting effect is intuitive and
its proposal to $B$ using this new estimate of $c_B$ (0.4 to 0.6) while in fact $c_B$ is drawn from the unbiased distribution (0.3 to 0.7). More concretely, $A$ erroneously concludes that $B$’s fatality tolerance is neither extremely high nor extremely low. $A$ optimizes its proposal based on this faulty assessment while in fact $B$’s tolerance could fall anywhere in the full distribution. Bounded rationality in the model only applies to an actor’s representation of the strategic situation. Conditional on the representation, actor behavior is value maximizing, not satisficing (Bendor et al. 2011).

Players in the model depart from a rationalist benchmark in a limited and well-defined form. Unwarranted certainty is modeled as an actor believing the available information offers more precision about the value of an opponent’s resolve than the available information actually provides. Overprecision could stem from selective exposure or perception or from correlational neglect, all of which are deviations from the standard Bayesian account of belief formation (Glaeser and Sunstein 2009; Ortoleva and Snowberg 2015). Though I am agnostic between these possible causes of overprecision, the case studies in Chapters 4 and 5 help adjudicate between them in specific instances.

Alternatively, we can frame overprecision in terms of the common priors assumption. In the standard rationalist setup, Nature draws the adversary’s costs from the prescribed distribution $F(z)$ and both actors know this. In the revised structure with estimative error, Nature again draws $B$’s costs from $F(z)$ but $A$ believes the draw comes from a different distribution, one that incorporates errors in proportion to the magnitude of $\theta$. The estimative error pertains to $A$’s direct beliefs about $B$’s type, not to second order beliefs—that immediate in this context. Moreover, there is less consistent evidence of overoptimism than for overprecision because the former is prone to reversals (Moore and Healy 2008).

\[15\] This is distinct from greater precision on the estimate of the success parameter in a Bernoulli trial with known and fixed outcome values (Friedman and Zeckhauser 2015). Rather, in my model the possible outcome values (for resolve) are themselves unknown and precision refers to the distribution of these values.

\[16\] Gerber and Green (1999) highlight problems with verifying selective exposure or perception, which I address below.

\[17\] See the debate between Fey and Ramsay (2006) and Smith and Stam (2004) on the implications of allowing for heterogeneous priors. As elaborated on in the case studies, it requires heroic assumptions to reconcile the heterogeneous priors I consider with Bayesian learning models.
is, not to beliefs about beliefs.

2.3.2 Analysis and Discussion

The relationship of interest is whether increasing the degree of overprecision affects the ex ante probability of war. Varying $\theta$ demonstrates that the probability of war can be increasing in overprecision. The result is particularly pronounced at the extreme where a single point forecast is substituted for an estimate that should have uncertainty. When the war probability is not increasing in overprecision, it decreases more gradually than in the warranted certainty case. This result runs in opposition to the standard rationalist model used for Hypothesis 1a. The upper line in Figure 2.1 plots the comparative static.

Figure 2.1: Certainty’s conditional effect on war onset. This figure summarizes the analysis. For the lower line, $F(z)$ begins as $c_B \sim U(0.05,0.55)$ and collapses to $c_B = 0.3$. The upper line plots the probability of war for a fixed $F(z)$ as excess certainty ($\theta$) increases. Here $F(z)$ is $c_B \sim U(0.05,0.55)$ and $\theta$ goes from 0 to 1.

Hypothesis 1b: The ex ante probability of conflict can increase in unwarranted certainty and is decreasing at a strictly greater rate in warranted certainty than in unwarranted certainty.

$^{18}$Parameter values are as follows: $\theta$ shifts from 0 to 1 with $c_B \sim U(0.05,0.55)$, $c_A = 0.2$, and $p = 0.4$. 

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An actor’s beliefs about opponent resolve shape the risk-reward tradeoff in bargaining. If higher certainty beliefs cause $A$ to make more onerous bargaining demands (i.e., $x$ increases), the probability of war increases. Intuitively, steeper bargaining demands increase the likelihood the opponent is sufficiently tough such that they reject the proposal and opt for conflict. As in the standard rationalist account, war occurs when the opponent is sufficiently resolved that it demands more than is being offered. If the opponent is actually a low resolve type, then overprecision need not generate war. The opponent might receive a less favorable bargaining proposal due to overprecision but the peaceful settlement is still more attractive than conflict given its low level of resolve.

This intuition helps address the non-monotonicity. With the given parameter values as a starting point, the probability of war initially declines as the proposing state $A$ believes the enemy’s resolve is more narrowly prescribed. As a result, the returns to risking war shrink because the perceived difference in the quality of bargains needed to appease a strong enemy versus a weak enemy shrinks. Given the declining “reward” to greedy bargaining demands, the proposing state opts to reduce the risk of war. However, the dynamic changes once $A$ narrows its estimate to the point where it is willing to make proposals that would satisfy the most resolved enemy (as erroneously perceived by the $A$). $A$ will make the most onerous demands possible ($\min(c_B) + p$) that still satisfy $B$ such that $A$ perceives there is no chance of war. Further false certainty substantively means that $A$ excludes the possibility that $B$ is either extremely resolved or extremely unresolved. As $A$ gets more certain and ignores the possibility that $B$ could be highly resolved, $A$ makes increasingly onerous demands. More onerous demands increase the probability of war. At the extreme case of total excess certainty, $A$ assumes $c_B$ is the mean value of $F(z)$. This produces a 50% probability of war because $B$’s actual resolve is drawn from a distribution with half of its mass on either side of the mean.\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\)The intuition is similar with a beta distribution, but without the clarity provided by a uniform’s shrinking bounds.
To fix concepts, consider the earlier quote from Allen Dulles regarding his certainty about success in the Bay of Pigs operation. A less certain assessment would place some weight on the possibility that the Cuban populace staunchly supported Castro and that his forces were highly resolved. Granting this possibility would change the US estimate of Cuba’s reservation value. US officials would then be willing to make less onerous bargaining demands. However, Dulles precluded the possibility of Castro being a high resolve type, in the sense of having consolidated his hold on Cuba’s instruments of power. Consequently, US demands exceeded anything Castro would accept. Bargaining fails due to these high US demands.

State $A$ optimizes its behavior conditional on its beliefs, which may suffer from overprecision. What strategic actions, if any, can $B$ take? For instance, assuming $B$ knows $A$’s belief is overprecise, can it credibly provide information to eliminate the overprecision? It cannot due to its incentives to misrepresent. As in Fearon (1995), opponents would only send a message indicating either they are the strong type or attempting to generate greater uncertainty about their type when it improves their bargaining position. The estimating state rationally discounts this message given the opponents’ incentives. A sufficiently costly signal could alter this dynamic, though it is difficult to conceive of what form these uncertainty-generating signals would take in practice.\[^{20}\]

Some clarifying notes are in order. First, why don’t leaders adjust their estimates given the potential for overprecision to produce ex post inefficient outcomes? Individuals typically do not believe they are making errors. Even when warned of overprecision, individuals fail to fully adjust their estimates (Alpert and Raiffa 1982). Ortoleva and Snowberg (2015) conclude, “it is very difficult to persuade overconfident [overprecise] citizens that their prior is incorrect, as they tend to attribute contradictory information to others’ biases.” Difficulty recognizing overprecision in one’s own estimates also helps explain why there is limited

\[^{20}\]Empirically, states have tried to induce uncertainty in their adversaries. For instance, US officials adopted a policy of strategic ambiguity toward cross-Strait relations during the Clinton administration. See Benson and Niou (n.d.) for a rationalization of this policy position, highlighting third party considerations that are beyond the scope of the theory.
learning within and across executive administrations about this source of error. Leaders are notorious for drawing inappropriate lessons from past events (Jervis 1976; Khong 1992). Similarly, the disinclination to believe one is overly certain distinguishes overprecision from problems of costly information acquisition. Perceptual errors, not high information acquisition costs, cause overprecision. Second, why do I assume the belief’s mean is appropriate given the available information? As noted earlier, separating precision and optimism is justified as the two forms of overconfidence are orthogonal to one another. From a modeling perspective, holding the mean accurate allows me to isolate the effects of overprecision and differentiates the contribution from past studies of optimism (Johnson 2004).

The importance of theorizing certainty’s causes should be readily apparent. The hypotheses are in tension with one another in the absence of a reliable means for establishing the appropriate amount of certainty. The effect of increasing the degree of observed certainty on conflict likelihood is contingent on whether that increase is due to quality information or perceptual error. Understanding the source of the certainty resolves the ambiguous empirical implications.

An implicit assumption thus far is that there is variation in whether or not estimated certainty is warranted. If all individuals (or groups) in all contexts are equally prone to overprecision errors then there is no value to hypothesizing interactive effects. However, there is compelling evidence that individuals systematically vary in their likelihood of approximating rationalist behavior—that is, behavior without overprecision errors (Stanovich and West 1998; Coelho 2010). Heterogeneity in adherence or divergence from rationalist expectations also occurs among political elites (Tetlock 2005; Hafner-Burton et al. 2014; Rathbun 2015). Approximation of rationalist crisis decision-making processes even varies across time for fixed groups and individuals—e.g., between Kennedy administration processes for the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis (Janis 1982; Herek, Janis, and Huth 1987). The next section theorizes sources of this heterogeneity as it relates to the proclivity for overprecision.

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21President Kennedy is a partial exception within the data as there is evidence of more thorough information gathering processes after the Bay of Pigs.
with an emphasis on the interagency processes that shape leaders’ beliefs.

2.4 Causes of Overprecision

When is certainty most likely to be warranted? I specify an information aggregation process in crises and theorize circumstances that increase overprecision errors with an emphasis on the substance of estimation. Errors stem from an executive’s failure to solicit input from a diverse set of advisers tapped into a diverse set of informational sources. A division of labor between advisers assures that the content they emphasize and invoke during assessment processes differs. Assessments that marginalize input from advisers with unique substantive remits, thus failing to solicit their information, are prone to overprecision errors. I provide a theory in which divergent bureaucratic tasks, not divergent preferences, generate informational dynamics that can produce estimation errors.

2.4.1 Actors and Aggregation

Subjective assessments are by definition the result of individual estimative efforts. Which individuals matter? The bargaining framework assumes each state is a unitary actor. To map this construct to actual national security assessment processes, I consider the executive’s beliefs to represent the state’s beliefs. The estimate of interest is the executive’s estimate. The nature and content of input she receives from advisers shapes the executive’s estimate. Accordingly, leaders and close advisers, as opposed to state or system level variables, serve as the locus of analysis for the theory of certainty’s causes. These are the actual decision makers assessing and optimizing foreign policy. Regime type is mismatched with the theoretical concepts of interest. In the US, electoral and congressional considerations may affect whether war occurs, but are largely absent from the assessment process itself. Moreover, a regime-centric approach denies actors the agency that is empirically evident. A burgeoning literature in international security postulates that leaders play a pivotal role in conflict \cite{Saunders2011,Horowitz2015}, albeit one that is often cir-
cumscribed by the institutional structures surrounding them (Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Weeks 2014). Rather than emphasize institutional pressures, I expand the analysis beyond leaders by incorporating their senior advisers. These advisers provide information and opinions that intimately shape executive estimates. Understanding Kissinger’s input is essential to analyzing President Nixon’s certainty when deciding to expand US involvement in the Vietnam War into Cambodia.

Understanding how elites contribute to estimated certainty requires a conception of information transmission and aggregation. I posit that a leader and advisers share a common objective during international crises of maximizing their state’s payoff. Krasner (1972) provides a strong defense of this assumption in the US context. Notably, the president selects his own advisers and can sanction them for incompetence, both of which facilitate communication (Krehbiel 1991; Meirowitz 2006). Thus I am not modeling the leader-adviser dynamic as an agency problem. Due to their aligned preferences, there is an equilibrium in which information transmission is unproblematic (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond 2001). Advisers offer their true perceptions of the situation and the executive (or leader) updates her beliefs accordingly.

This conception differs from the Bureaucratic Politics Model of Allison (1971), in which elites have divergent preferences shaped by parochial interests which undermine information transmission. Scholars contest the empirical validity of that Allison model (Snyder and Diesing 1977; Bendor and Hammond 1992; Welch 1992). Context is key for assessing whether bureaucratic position reliably predicts actor preferences. In budgetary matters, the argument for such a link is compelling. However, the evidence is mixed in crisis decision-making settings (despite their potential budgetary implications) with several notable counter-examples, such as Secretary of State Clinton’s hawkish position on the Afghanistan surge (Marsh 2014) or Defense Secretary McNamara’s relatively dovish stance during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I model advisers as general welfare maximizers who can reliably communicate with the president. Whether elite communication occurs as theorized is testable. If contrary to the supposition, preferences are predictable based on bureaucratic
position then leaders will discount messages that match ex ante expectations. Only those messages that go against type, such as a State Department official expressing a preference for using force, will influence presidential assessments. Empirical tests in Chapter 3 refute this alternative contention.

Due to sufficient preference overlap in crisis settings, I expect that advisers offer their true beliefs to the leader and the leader rationally incorporates this information. Consequently, the executive’s aggregated assessments will approximate the average of elite estimates weighted by an elite’s access to the executive or floor time in meetings. As developed below, overprecision stems from problems related to information sources, not information transmission.

2.4.2 How Aggregation Produces Overprecision

Dynamics of bureaucratic information flow and aggregation can generate overprecision in the executive’s beliefs through two related pathways. In the first path, adviser estimates are unbiased based on the information they have access to and prioritize, which is endogenous to their substantive remit. The aggregation process itself produces overprecision. Limited executive exposure to advisers with access to alternative information sources, or focused on alternative substantive issues, can yield overprecise estimates. If the advisers with regular access to the executive gather information from a common source or only consider a subset of relevant opponent attributes, this can induce correlational neglect whereby the failure to recognize the lack of informational diversity leads the executive to believe high certainty is merited given the multitude of common messages. Correlational neglect, in this case, stems from a lack of input from advisers with alternative information sources or substantive interests. Even if exposed to these alternative accounts, overprecision persists if the executive discounts their messages—e.g., due to selective perception. Consistent with the multiple advocacy literature (George 1972; George and Stern 2002; Pfiffner 2011) and work on civil-military relations (Brooks 2008), soliciting information from diverse sources decreases the probability of assessment errors.
A second, related, pathway can produce aggregated overprecision. In this path, some advisers are themselves overprecise. Again, imbalanced adviser input to the executive plays a role. When advisers with overprecise estimates are highly involved in the deliberation process, the aggregate assessment will be overprecise. In this pathway estimative errors occurring at the adviser level become manifest at the executive level.

In sum, either flaws in the advisory input process or similar flaws coupled with advisers’ own estimative errors cause executive overprecision. Either process is sufficient to generate behavior consistent with the prior section’s model. That said, I find evidence consistent with the latter contention whereby overprecision at the adviser level, coupled with aggregation processes that marginalize those least prone to overprecision, produces overprecision at the executive level.

The focus is on elite advisers with regular access to the executive and not on intelligence analysts from lower levels of the bureaucracy. I expect, and observe, that the extent of overprecision is greater among elite advisers than in intelligence reports. The intelligence cycle literature (Betts 1978; Halperin and Clapp 2006; Rovner 2011) documents that estimative uncertainty is improperly transmitted and received when passing from analysts to policy-makers, due to the latter’s scarcity of time or their distrust of the intelligence community.

### 2.4.3 Sources of Overprecision

What factors reduce the prevalence of overprecision? Put differently, when are actors more likely to recognize the full scope of uncertainty? My hypothesis focuses on the substance of estimation. Individuals are more likely to recognize the full scope of uncertainty when they consider all factors that affect the estimated quantity. For instance, estimates of expected war outcomes that consider not just raw military assets, but also an opponent’s military training, a net assessment of how opposing sides’ forces interact, and an opponent’s

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22This expectation is substantively consistent with the account in Yarhi-Milo (2013). However, this is not to suggest that overprecision is absent from intelligence products. See Friedman and Zeckhauser (2012) for examples.
resolve or political traits are less prone to overprecision. Adding dimensions which carry uncertainty to the estimation process counteracts the tendency toward overprecision. Ignoring salient dimensions and their attendant uncertainty is akin to an overprecision error as doing so produces an overly certain estimate.

Estimation processes frequently marginalize the political, as opposed to military, factors that affect expected conflict outcomes. Consider two ways political attributes shape expected conflict payoffs. First, political qualities such as resolve, unity, and interests directly affect military efficacy. Leaders had to grasp the extent of North Vietnamese resolve and its willingness to bear costs to identify negotiated settlements preferable to fighting. Political factors directly affect resolve ($c_B$ in the model) but they can also affect the prospects for military victory (the model’s $p$ parameter). High level political defections against Arbenz’s incumbent regime were critical for military victory in the CIA’s Guatemalan plan in 1954. Estimates from the Joint Chiefs of Staff before the Bay of Pigs similarly concluded that success hinged upon uprisings and defections.

Second, an opponent’s broader political landscape affects post-conflict planning and has ramifications for translating military accomplishments into political gains. Military success is not an end in itself as it must be translated into securing political objectives, such as territory or preferred policy outcomes. The pertinent conflict outcome is not the strictly military result but rather the resulting political division of the contested resource. Bargaining models abstract away this complication. Building from a Clausewitzian conception of war as an “act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,” the model assumes victors in combat can impose their preferred political settlement (Clausewitz 1976, p. 75). Most conflicts fall short of the ideal type of absolute war with absolute victory. In such cases, it is logically equivalent and more empirically accurate to conceive of $p$ as the expected political settlement or division of the contested resource after conflict. Combat outcomes are correlated with but not determinative of payoffs in this conception. States derive utility from the postwar settlement, not from combat outcomes themselves. Leader beliefs about an adversary’s

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23Recall that expected conflict outcomes dictate the bounds of the bargaining range.
political landscape inform estimates about translating military gains into the political gains for which the conflict was fought. Estimates of the US payoff to the Iraq War rested on beliefs about what postwar policies it could install in Baghdad. This in turn depended on assessments of Iraqi military attributes, crucial for displacing Saddam, but also Iraqi political attributes, crucial for replacing Saddam.

An adversary’s political attributes matter as they dictate the scope of the bargaining range, affecting both the enemy’s costs to fighting and the expected postwar division of the contested resource. Marginalizing these political factors causes overprecision by neglecting a source of uncertainty.

What does marginalization mean in practice? Substantively, it entails limited executive access to information sources pertinent for estimating these political attributes. Alternatively, marginalization can mean altogether overlooking these political attributes during the assessment process. Doing so is akin to attaching an implicitly assumed value to these attributes—e.g., an opponent’s resolve—without recognizing uncertainty attendant with this estimate. Either way, failing to recognize uncertainty over these political attributes yields aggregated assessments that understate the total degree of uncertainty over the salient parameters that shape bargaining demands—i.e., estimates are overprecise.

Marginalizing political attributes is less problematic if actors can reliably infer their values from an adversary’s military attributes, which do receive estimative scrutiny. However, a state’s military capabilities do not consistently shed light on its depth of commitment to an issue at stake or the difficulties one likely encounters when translating a military victory over this state into political gains. A state with fixed and known military capabilities may have varying resolve over multiple potential disputes depending on the salience of the issues at stake—e.g., fixed Soviet capabilities in 1962 did not indicate a common degree of resolve over all potential Soviet disputes with the US. Marginalizing an adversary’s political attributes in assessment processes remains problematic even if engaging in careful analysis about the adversary’s military attributes because the latter does not reliably predict the former.
2.4.4 When are Political Attributes Marginalized?

Executives could avoid, or at least limit, overprecision errors by soliciting input from the full array of their advisers. Advisers, I posit, draw upon different information sources and bring different points of emphases to the assessment process due to the variation in the substantive tasks assigned to them. Extracting their varied informational input, which due to unified preferences is simply a matter of soliciting it, guards against the correlational neglect and selective exposure problems that generate overprecision at the executive level. Though the executive’s task is straightforward in theory, solicitation of diverse input often falls short of this ideal in practice. Whether due to constraints on the executive’s time or cognitive capacity, deficits in interagency processes, or idiosyncrasies of interpersonal relationships, marginalization of advisers is commonplace.

From the perspective of generating testable theoretical implications, we must specify when executives are most likely to marginalize the aforementioned political considerations. That is, how can we translate the theoretical concept of interest—marginalizing an adversary’s political attributes—into an observable variable? Here I return to the substantive task assigned to advisers. An adviser’s remit affects the information sources and substantive points of emphases he brings to bear in the assessment process. An adviser tasked with evaluating an opponent’s political characteristics is least likely to ignore or understate the uncertainty associated with them. I posit that elites who oversee international diplomacy are least likely to neglect these political factors. In the US context, this stipulates that State Department officials are most likely to focus on and be cognizant of the added complications of assessing an opponent’s resolve and political landscape.

Marginalization of an adversary’s political attributes is most probable when State Department officials have limited input in the assessment process. Who is involved matters, but it matters for a different reason than the one typically proffered. In Allison’s long shadow, bureaucracies in international relations are reduced to “pulling and hauling” for influence to advance their own divergent set of preferences. I similarly stress the importance of bu-
reauratic influence but attribute that importance to the unique information and expertise housed within different agencies due to their substantive specializations. An executive’s failure to marshall these diverse information sources causes estimation errors.

Diplomats differ due to their institutional mandate to oversee foreign policy which requires expertise on an opponent’s military and political attributes. In contrast, individuals from other bureaucracies tasked with defense and security policy are comparatively more likely to focus on military attributes of conflict and ignore its political dimensions. This is not to say that all officials from other agencies, such as the Department of Defense, always ignore an adversary’s political attributes. Many Pentagon officials are specialists on precisely these political factors. But as stipulated earlier, I focus on advisers with regular access to the executive, not on lower level analysts. At the level of principals and their deputies, predispositions about the points to raise with the president vary with institutional affiliations. Secretaries of Defense and State may both receive information from their staffs on an opponent’s domestic political landscape but their likelihood of conveying this information to the executive differs.

State Department officials reduce the likelihood of overprecision through the two paths mentioned earlier. In the first, the advisory process itself generates overprecision. Some advisers have limited, or no, input in the executive’s estimate. Curtailing information from these advisers (1) allows the executive to ignore an adversary’s political attributes or take them for granted thus failing to recognize uncertainty in these implicit estimates or (2) induces correlational neglect if the marginalized advisers are tapped into alternative information sources.

Second, the flawed process coupled with estimative errors at the level of advisers can generate overprecise estimates at the executive level. In this pathway, I contend that officials from the State Department are themselves less prone to overprecision errors. The argument is not that State Department officials necessarily differ in cognitive dispositions or due to a bureaucratic culture that encourages uncertainty. Borrowing terms from Berlin (1953) and others (Tetlock 2005), I do not assert that diplomats are foxes while all others
are hedgehogs. Nor is the argument about strategic bureaucratic behavior whereby State Department officials inflate their uncertainty to foster diplomacy and help their organization gain prominence or resources (though I address these possibilities and other alternative explanations later). Preference divergence is not the source of estimate variation. And neither is variation in risk tolerance. Rather, State Department officials are less prone to overprecision because they are institutionally mandated to analyze factors that are important but frequently overlooked by others. Moreover, they may draw upon information sources that others neglect, such as foreign service cables. As opposed to Allison’s “where you stand depends on where you sit” notion of bureaucratic politics (Allison 1971, p. 711), I contend that what you consider depends on where you sit.

Either of these two pathways—one in which non-diplomat advisers are not overprecise and one where they are—is consistent with the theory. Empirical tests in Chapter 3 distinguish between the two with results consistent with the latter pathway. That is, I find non-diplomats are overprecise. These adviser-level errors, coupled with flawed information aggregation processes that marginalize input from diplomats, produce overprecision at the executive level.

Overprecision in the executive’s aggregate estimate is less likely when the estimation process heavily involves State Department officials. When including these officials, certainty is more likely to stem from quality information. When excluding them, certainty is more likely due to overprecision. The extent of State Department involvement in assessment processes conditions, or moderates, the relationship between certainty and conflict.

The preceding discussion generates the following hypothesis with two implications.

**Hypothesis 2:** Greater involvement of elites who oversee international diplomacy reduces the likelihood of overprecision.

- **Implication A:** In a given crises, elites who oversee international diplomacy will form less certain estimates than their counterparts from other organizations.
- **Implication B:** High involvement by elites who oversee international diplomacy conditions the relationship between certainty and conflict such that certainty causes peace.
Implication A follows from the second pathway linking information aggregation processes to executive-level overprecision. If advisers from outside the State Department are more prone to overprecision errors than diplomats are, then diplomats will form beliefs with greater uncertainty.\(^{24}\) Implication B is the more important expectation as it links the causes and consequences of certainty. The intuition is straightforward. Assessment processes that integrate diplomats are less prone to overprecision. When these elites are included, certainty is likely warranted. When certainty is warranted, the standard rationalist expectation holds where certainty facilitates bargaining.

To fix ideas consider examples of policy makers ignoring salient political factors and then examples where State Department officials flagged those factors and the uncertainty around them. With reference to post-conflict political planning, President Obama suggested that the US and partners “underestimated” the difficulty of achieving the desired political outcomes in Libya. He continued, “So that’s a lesson that I now apply every time I ask the question, ‘Should we intervene militarily? Do we have an answer [for] the day after?’”\(^{25}\) Though startling that such questions are not always asked before conflict, it is indicative of overprecision errors at the highest levels of US decision making on the most important matters. Similarly, estimating expected outcomes in the Iraq War required estimates of the conventional capabilities and resolve of the Iraqi national forces and estimates of the difficulty that US and Coalition forces would experience in translating conventional military success into their preferred political outcomes. A prioritization of the former and poorly sourced, high-certainty estimates of the latter generated overprecise estimates for the war’s expected payoff.

State Department analysis frequently casts doubt on the certain projections of others due to its emphasis on the political reasoning and conditions of opponent states. Returning

\(^{24}\)This might be an unfair comparison if advisers are tasked with estimating non-overlapping attributes of the adversary—e.g., some assess military characteristics while others address political ones. For instance, evidence consistent with this implication may simply reveal that there is more information available about an adversary’s military, as opposed to its political, attributes. Put another way, estimating military attributes could be easier than estimating political ones.

to the Iraq War, State Department officials, who were largely excluded from the post-war planning process (Halperin and Clapp 2006, p. 171), warned military commanders of “serious planning gaps for post-conflict public security and humanitarian assistance . . . which would undermine an otherwise successful military campaign.”

State Department officials were dubious of CIA estimates about Cuba’s political conditions before the Bay of Pigs. However, CIA’s demand for secrecy caused their exclusion from many deliberations. Similarly, during the Nixon Administration’s discussion of launching incursions into Cambodia, Secretary of State Rogers and his Under Secretaries questioned others’ estimative certainty about the viability of the new Cambodian regime.

Figure 2.2: Salient overprecise advisers and the results. On the top, Allen Dulles and captured members of the Bay of Pigs Brigade. On the bottom, Donald Rumsfeld and a Baghdad looter (clockwise attribution starting with Dulles: Wikimedia Commons; JFK Presidential Library; David Leeson, Dallas Morning News; US Department of Defense).

Could diplomats’ marginalization be consistent with a standard Bayesian framework? Gerber and Green (1999) highlight the difficulty of distinguishing Bayesian learning from

26Memo to Under Secretary Dobriansky, February 7, 2003, NSA Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 163. State Department officials even exhibited greater uncertainty on military matters, as its Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) was the leading skeptic regarding Iraqi weapons programs in the build-up to the 2003 war (National Intelligence Estimate 2002).
estimative errors. A failure to update in response to (or expose oneself to) credible information sources is perhaps the most telling characteristic of faulty information processing. But it is difficult to delineate credible from incredible information. Individuals with conflicting Bayesian likelihood functions can rationally disagree about what a piece of evidence is evidence of and about the credibility of that evidence. However, this problem is less biting in my context. The State Department is a major organ in the US national security decision-making apparatus. Its marginalization is consistent with a standard Bayesian framework only if we assume that its information and messages are not credible. I see no basis for this assumption. The sole plausible one relates back to whether its parochial interests imply limited preference alignment with the president. I have already refuted this point and return to it again in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

2.4.5 When are Diplomats Involved?

Foreshadowing the quantitative analysis in Chapter 3, I turn to potential criticisms of my choice to operationalize marginalization of political attributes with a lack of State Department input. A possible critique is that it is not random who gets the most floor time or access to the executive. Leaders might be inclined in one direction and only seek advice from those suspected to have confirming dispositions. If the president wants a diplomatic solution, he might select to give the State Department more floor time. However, selection of this sort biases results toward finding that greater State Department involvement reduces conflict likelihood but this is not a key implication of the theory. Implication B does not address the direct relationship between State Department involvement and war. Rather, the implication concerns the relationship between certainty and war conditional on high State Department involvement. Even conditional on State Department involvement, there is variation in estimated certainty across crises due to different levels of available information.

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27The theory, roughly, expects that State Department involvement has an indeterminate effect on conflict likelihood due to the non-monotonic relationship between unwarranted certainty (θ) and conflict. Rather than observing an indeterminate relationship, selection bias causes high State Department involvement to reduce conflict likelihood.
The hypothesis addresses how this variation within instances with high State Department involvement associates with war and how this relationship differs when State Department involvement is low. Imagine two crises where the president is predisposed toward a peaceful outcome. The selection story suggests the State Department would be highly involved in each estimation process and peace would ensue in both cases. This would not bias results in favor of validating the hypotheses. Due to differing information levels, there will be variation in the estimated certainty in the two crises. I hypothesize that war is more likely in the crisis with less certainty.

We can also empirically assess this criticism. If marginalization stems from pre-existing beliefs about State Department dispositions, then the cheap talk implications mentioned earlier become relevant. Imagine diplomats prefer peace to war and strategically employ uncertainty to lobby against conflict. If this is true, then State Department officials expressing a high degree of certainty—that is, when they go against “type”—should be strongly associated with the use of force. However, I find no evidence for this relationship in Chapter 3 and thus discount the bureaucratic cheap talk alternative hypothesis. It is the information provided, not preference divergence, that produces overprecision.

Even if the most obvious explanation for diplomats’ marginalization does not bias results in favor of the theory, the causes of such marginalization remain substantively interesting. However, theorizing its causes is beyond the scope of this project. Inductively, the cases in Chapters 4 and 5 shed some light on why assessment processes marginalize diplomats. Neither case is consistent with the concerns mentioned above. President Kennedy was not especially predisposed to authorize the Bay of Pigs mission and Secretary of State Rusk never argued against it when given opportunities, albeit limited, to do so. Similarly, Secretary Powell raised concerns about the estimative certainty underpinning the Bush administration’s war plan, but never explicitly opposed the war. In neither case was a president marginalizing diplomatic input because he believed diplomats would express countervailing opinions. Rather, marginalization stemmed from CIA’s demands for secrecy, a National Security Advisor’s failure to guide the interagency process, State Department’s own inability
to provide timely answers to the President, and idiosyncrasies of the individuals involved, especially related to personal relationships between the President and Secretary of State. Though all of these contentions are ex post conclusions from the empirical analysis, they nonetheless provide some insights into a substantively important question.

2.5 Conclusion and Roadmap for Testing

In sum, the consequences of certainty are indeterminate without considering whether certainty stems from quality information or overprecision errors. The prominence of diplomats in the estimative process conditions, or moderates, the relationship between certainty and war. Diplomats incorporate uncertainty about opponents’ political factors which reduces the prevalence of overprecision. As a result, when decision processes include diplomats, certainty is more likely to reflect quality information and cause peace as predicted in standard bargaining models. When decision processes marginalize diplomats, certainty is more likely to be unwarranted, lead to onerous bargaining demands, and cause conflict.

The next three chapters assess the theory’s empirical implications. Chapter 3 does so quantitatively. I construct an original data set of over 1,100 texts from declassified security documents and use automated text methods to develop a measure of estimative certainty. Using the new measure, the chapter tests the implications of the second hypothesis, showing that (1) conditional on a crisis, diplomats do express greater uncertainty than peers and (2) the extent to which decision makers consider an adversary’s political attributes and recognize their attendant uncertainty (indicated by the extent of State Department involvement) conditions the relationship between certainty and peace.

Quantitative tests are unable to evaluate some of the theoretical implications. The qualitative case studies in Chapters 4 and 5 are better suited for analyzing all the steps along the theory’s causal chain. My objective in the cases is not to reconfirm inferences from the quantitative chapter—for instance through paired case studies—but rather to evaluate whether the mechanisms highlighted in the theory illuminate bargaining dynamics in actual
cases. I restrict my attention to cases with parameter values consistent with the most original elements of the theory—cases with low State Department involvement and high certainty. This chapter offered a roadmap for how such conditions generate war. I use this roadmap to guide the qualitative analysis. In particular, I evaluate each case on six conditions that should hold if the theoretical contentions are valid. These are:

1. the adversary’s political attributes affected estimated payoffs to war;
2. some advisers had high-certainty, overprecise estimates over these attributes;
3. these advisers held sway with the president;
4. diplomats (as well as other advisers) were more uncertain based on available information before a final decision to use force;
5. officials marginalized diplomats;
6. overprecise estimates about payoffs to war caused the president to make onerous bargaining demands that the adversary rejected, leading to conflict.

Chapters 4 and 5 assess whether historical cases followed this roadmap. Furthermore, I evaluate plausible alternative explanations. From standard rationalist accounts, I address whether decision-makers’ estimative certainty was consistent with Bayesian updating and whether alternative rationalist explanations for war—such as commitment problems or the adversary’s uncertainty over US attributes—were pertinent for bargaining failure. From accounts of bureaucratic politics, I evaluate whether actors’ preferences diverged in accordance with their institutional affiliations—that is, did diplomats strictly prefer peace. Finally, I address whether presidents marginalized diplomats because of a pre-existing disposition to use force. Case studies thus complement results from the quantitative analysis, offering more granular evaluations of causal mechanisms and alternative explanations.
3 Quantitative Evidence for Overprecision in Bargaining

3.1 Testing the Argument

Why is a leader’s estimative certainty sometimes linked to conflict, as it was for the Bay of Pigs operation, and other times associated with peace, as it was when North Korea seized the USS Pueblo? What are the sources of that certainty to begin with? The prior chapter theorizes the causes and consequences of certainty in the decision for war. It specifies that when leaders recognize uncertainty over an adversary’s political attributes—which is more likely when diplomats are included in the assessment process—certainty facilitates peaceful settlements. In the converse conditions, certainty can increase the probability of conflict.

This chapter tests these contentions quantitatively. Drawing on a new data set of declassified security documents, I construct a measure of presidents’ and senior advisers’ estimative certainty. I employ this measure in statistical analysis, finding that the extent of State Department involvement in Cold War crises conditioned the relationship between certainty and peace.

3.2 Observations, Documents, and Measurement

This section describes the sampling procedure, construction of a corpus of documents, methods of measuring certainty, and the outcome, explanatory, and control variables.
3.2.1 Opportunities to Use Force

An opportunity to use force is the unit of analysis. Existing definitions for opportunities to use force are insufficiently strict for my purposes (Fordham 1998; Meernik 2004). I define an opportunity to use force as any instance in which a state’s leader and senior advisers seriously discussed using its own military to strike abroad. This definition excludes analyses at lower levels in bureaucracies (such as Department of Defense war-gaming), minor shows of force with no intention or discussion of actually using it, and decisions restricted to whether to arm or fund combatants in war. The objective is to identify instances where decision makers faced a clear choice between costly conflict and peaceful measures.

The sample is restricted to US opportunities to use force during the Eisenhower through Carter administrations. There are benefits to the sampling restriction as it holds many potential confounders constant. First, keeping the assessing state constant mitigates concerns that institutional differences across states are driving the results. As one of two superpowers, US behavior is more than a parochial concern, but rather of general interest. Second, background characteristics that may affect estimated and expressed uncertainty—such as gender, education, and race—were virtually constant among elites. Third, the strategic environment of the international system during the Cold War was relatively similar, albeit with periods of detente, across the administrations. Fourth, on a practical note, these temporal bounds also reflect the availability and consistency of the main documentary evidence source. However, these spatial and temporal bounds raise external validity concerns which I address later.

The sample is primarily drawn from two sources. First, I collect crises where the International Crisis Behavior data set codes the the US as an actor (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1998). Second, borrowing from Fordham (1998), I include instances with major military mobilizations, which Blechman and Kaplan (1978 p. 50) code as level one and two uses of force. Directing many military assets toward a possible conflict location is a good indication of serious discussions about using force. These two sources contribute 46 observations. I
supplement the sample with 15 additional observations. These include some of Blechman and Kaplan’s more critical level three and four military mobilizations, militarized interstate disputes (not all of which included the use of force) (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004), and debates concerning preventive strikes against the nascent nuclear programs of the Soviet Union and China. I present robustness results excluding these additional 15 cases throughout the results discussion.  

The criteria yield a sample of 61 observations, listed in Table 3.1 Some observations concern potential conflict onset—such as the 1958 turbulence in Lebanon, 1969 North Korean EC-121 spy plane incident, and 1975 Cambodian Mayaguez seizure. Others capture pivotal moments to potentially expand the scope of ongoing conflicts—such as 1953 deliberations surrounding the Korean War armistice and 1971 invasion of Laos during the Vietnam War. There is wide variation in the explanatory variables across the observations. State Department involvement in assessments varies from instances of close collaboration between Eisenhower and Dulles to cases of high marginalization during the Nixon administration. Additionally, the extent of available information varied from cases with poor intelligence (such as the Iranian Revolution) to cases with relatively rich intelligence (such as the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia).

### 3.2.2 Corpus

Difficulty measuring decision-maker beliefs has plagued empirical studies of war. Uncertainty is an omitted confounder for most quantitative tests (Morrow 1989). Prior efforts have used the balance of capabilities (Reed 2003), leader turnover (Rider 2013), media trans-

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1 See the Appendix for more on sampling criteria. Sample censoring by excluding cases where using force never received scrutiny could introduce bias if the cause of the censoring relates to the level of certainty. To bias results in favor of the hypothesis for cases where I anticipate certainty is warranted, the cases excluded due to sample censoring, which definitionally ended peacefully, would need to have low certainty estimates. The inverse would need to hold for cases where I expect unwarranted certainty. Thus, to confirm the hypothesized moderated relationship between certainty and conflict, the censoring bias would have to flip directions depending on State Department involvement.

2 I provide additional information about the observations—their sample qualification criteria and the precipitating context—in the Appendix.
Table 3.1: Opportunities to Use Force

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Observation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Chinese Offshore</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Laos I</td>
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<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Korean War Armistice</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Panama Flag</td>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>Soviet Nuclear*</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Tonkin Gulf</td>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>Dien Bien Phu</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Pleiku</td>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>Taiwain Straits I</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Six Day War</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Suez</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>Jordan I</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
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<td>Syria</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Tet</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Taiwan Straits Turmoil*</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Cambodia Bombing</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>Berlin Deadline</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Korea EC-121</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Indonesia*</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Black September</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>Jordan II</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Cambodia Invasion</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>Cienfuegos</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>Taiwan Straits II</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Cuban Shipping*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Cuba*</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Laos II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Bay Of Pigs</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Christmas Bombing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Berlin Wall</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Ports Mining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Kuwait*</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Arab Israeli War</td>
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<td>Pathet Lao</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Libya*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Phuoc Vinh</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Cyprus II*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Trujillo</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Angola</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>China Arms Buildup*</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Mayaguez</td>
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<td>Cuban Missile Crisis</td>
<td>1975</td>
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<td>1962</td>
<td>Taiwan Return*</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Iran Revolution*</td>
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<td>China Nuclear*</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Shaba II</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
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<td>1963</td>
<td>Yemen*</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Cuban Soviet Brigade*</td>
</tr>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>1979</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Cyprus I</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates qualification with less restrictive sampling criteria

transparency (Bell 2013), and inter-coder disagreement over arms spending (Kaplow and Gartzke 2013) as proxies for uncertainty due to asymmetric information. I aim for a more direct approach, going straight to the private words of leaders and senior advisers to capture their estimative certainty.

To measure certainty I collect documentary evidence from elite deliberations about using...
force. Focusing on elites provides a direct measure of uncertainty in crisis bargaining. De-
classified reports made available through the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)
series are the core sources for these estimates. FRUS is the official documentary record
of the State Department, though it also includes materials from presidential libraries, De-
partment of Defense, National Security Council, Central Intelligence Agency, and other
agencies and individuals involved in crafting US foreign policy. Documents include National
Security Council meeting transcripts, intra-elite memos (such as memos from Kissinger to
President Nixon), and minutes from elite conversations in both unstructured (such as ad
hoc White House meetings) and structured settings (such as presidential briefings from the
Joint Chiefs of Staff). I separate content from multi-speaker transcripts into speaker-specific
texts to gauge the effect of organizational role on estimative certainty. Due to the limited
availability of FRUS volumes covering the Carter administration, I attempted to gather
the equivalent documentary evidence from the Carter Presidential Library archives. Tran-
scripts and memos akin to those found in FRUS were widely available for the six Carter-era
observations.\(^3\)

I limit the corpus to private memos and transcripts. Public statements are subject to
strategic considerations which alter the expressed certainty. Private conversations are more
likely to reflect sincere beliefs (though see Renshon (2009)). When opting to intervene in
the Laotian Civil War in 1964, Johnson told advisers “we should go ahead with the mission
but that he had doubts about the action.”\(^4\) A president making this statement publicly is
nearly inconceivable.

FRUS has potential limitations. For instance, some content remains classified, or cen-
sored. Data censoring within documents is of limited concern. Classified segments within
available texts typically concern targeting location details, such as which North Korean

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\(^3\)Partial exceptions include a limited record of input from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and little evidence
from deliberations in the two weeks preceding the April 1980 Iran Hostage rescue attempt. Additionally, I
supplement FRUS documents for the Cuban Missile Crisis with transcripts from the Executive Committee
of the National Security Council (ExComm).

\(^4\)Memorandum of Conference with President Johnson, June 8, 1964, _FRUS_, Volume XXVIII, Laos, 1964-
1968, Document 83.
harbors to strike. This is only a minor inconvenience because I am concerned with how leaders address uncertainty about conflict generally, not how they assess specific targets. Whether entire documents remain classified is a more difficult problem to assess. That said, the availability of documents with estimation errors (judged ex post) suggests that ongoing classification is unlikely to correlate with estimation errors in a way that biases results. More broadly, FRUS historians select documents elucidating policy formulation around major events. The document selection process likely prioritizes the historically significant over the mundane. A better approach for this study might forego this screening and instead scour all potentially relevant archives to develop the corpus from scratch. But the tradeoff is obvious as doing so sacrifices scalability. This chapter offers breadth over depth (to the extent FRUS document selection processes hinder depth) while the subsequent two chapters invert this balance.

FRUS volumes are typically organized by region and time period and consequently volumes contain documents that are unrelated to the observation of interest. Even when related to the observation, many documents contain nothing about the use of force and are inappropriate for measuring certainty over expected conflict outcomes. Accordingly, I read and prune the set of documents, retaining only those directly addressing issues related to the theory. For expositional clarity in the model, uncertainty only pertained to resolve. For the empirics I want to capture uncertainty over any factor affecting the bargaining range. This includes resolve, other salient political attributes, and military capabilities. The theoretical implications of using these factors are equivalent to using only resolve. I restrict the corpus to memos sent to or by the president and transcripts from meetings which the president attended. Given his primacy in the decision-making process, aggregate estimates should only be informed by opinions to which he was privy.\footnote{The 1976 North Korean Tree Trimming Incident meets the sampling criteria but is excluded because FRUS does not contain documents involving the President.}

In total, the corpus encompasses 1,109 speaker texts generated from 364 documents. 85% of speaker texts come from meeting transcripts with the remainder from memos. Across the
full document set there are 176 unique speakers and over 132,000 total words.

3.2.3 Measuring Uncertainty

Testing the hypotheses requires measurements of uncertainty at the level of each speaker, bureaucracy, and observation. I measure uncertainty with computer-assisted text analysis using a dictionary method similar to that found in McManus (forthcoming). The analysis uses the “If” dictionary, from the Harvard General Inquirer, constructed to measure uncertain tones. The dictionary includes words such as “approximately,” “doubt,” “possibility,” and “unpredictable.” I use a dictionary of uncertain words, rather than certain words, because the absence of either is more likely to be interpreted as estimative certainty than uncertainty. That is, a dearth of explicit uncertainty is more often understood as akin to certainty, than vice-versa. Moreover, in my pilot studies the uncertainty dictionary better matched the theoretical concept I aimed to measure.

Using the dictionary, I calculate the relative frequency of uncertain words as a percentage of total words in each text. Following prior work summarized in Grimmer and Stewart (2013), I construct measures by assigning a score of one to uncertain words, summing across the document, and dividing by the total number of words in the document.

This basic procedure provides measures of uncertainty at multiple levels. First, I split texts by speaker and construct a speaker level measure of uncertainty for each observation. Second, I aggregate speakers by bureaucratic role—such as including the content of a Secretary as well as an Under Secretary in creating a State Department uncertainty measure for each observation. Third, I construct an aggregate observation level uncertainty score. The first two measures help validate hypotheses about the causes of overprecision. I use the third measure, interacted with whether causes of overprecision are present, to test the consequences of certainty.

Figure 3.1 depicts an example text. Figure 3.2 plots the uncertainty

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6 Dictionary is available at http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~inquirer/. I make small edits to tailor the set of words to the context of theoretical interest. For instance, I add “risk” to the dictionary because decision makers often voice uncertainty by invoking risks.

7 The aggregation process implicitly assumes that all text is equally influential and that the aggregate
Ball and Thompson believe that the Chinese decision to intervene on the ground would, in the final analysis, probably depend largely on the extent to which Peiping felt assured of Soviet support. There is no way that we can safely predict whether or not such support would be forthcoming. They are convinced, however, that Chinese ground intervention would be great and the costs of such intervention tremendous—particularly since the very taking of this step by Peiping would presumably imply substantial Soviet involvement, perhaps even to the point of a large-scale Soviet-US confrontation.

Ball and Thompson have supported the air strikes that have so far taken place and they would support a program of gradually increasing military pressure. They believe that only in this way can the United States achieve a bargaining position that can make possible an international arrangement that will avoid a humiliating defeat to the United States. They do not believe, however, that we can realistically hope for an international arrangement that will effectively stop the insurrection in South Viet-Nam and deliver the entire country south of the Seventeenth Parallel to the government in Saigon free and clear of insurgency. They consider that the most we can realistically expect from any international arrangement are measures to stop the infiltration so that we may be able, over time, to reduce our commitments. Hopefully the military actions preceding such an arrangement would have created a sufficient sense of unity in Saigon to make it possible for the South Vietnamese Government—with diminishing United States help—to clean up an insurgency that had become manageable by the shutting of the borders.

Figure 3.1: Portion of a sample text with uncertain words highlighted.

score values for some salient observations across the distribution of uncertainty values.

Dictionary methods are difficult to validate (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). As elaborated upon in the Appendix, I adopt three approaches for assessing construct validity. First, I analyze instances where there are clear expectations for the relative degree of uncertainty. For example, some texts refer to another text as being too certain. During the EC-121 incident Defense Secretary Laird sent a memo to President Nixon suggesting that the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) estimate of what outcome US forces could impose on North Korea was overly certain. Laird cites risks and doubts about the efficacy of using force. Some text includes:

If U.S. losses occur in the strike (and I believe there is more chance they may than the JCS papers indicate)…It is not clear we have the capability now to handle a major confrontation in Korea, if the North Koreans should react with

assessment uncertainty reflects the volume of input each adviser provides. This is consistent with my theoretical contentions precluding cheap talk due to pre-existing bureaucratic preferences but is nonetheless a large empirical assumption. I test and validate this measurement construction method in a subsequent section.
Figure 3.2: Uncertainty score for some observations. Vertical line plots the mean score.

Laird’s memo should register a higher uncertainty score than observed in JCS communications. Indeed this is the case as Laird’s memo has an uncertainty score of 6.2% compared to the JCS memo with an uncertainty score of 2.6%. For reference, speaker texts with at least 50 words have a mean uncertainty score of 5.2% and standard deviation of 2.6%.

A second approach hand codes a subset of documents (roughly 5%) from the corpus into three levels of uncertainty. The third approach uses the same subset of documents but assigns uncertainty scores using a Bradley-Terry model based on pairwise comparisons of the relative uncertainty in two randomly selected documents from the subset (Bradley and Terry 1952; Turner and Firth 2012). Results from both approaches are positively correlated.

(53% and 34% respectively) with the dictionary method uncertainty scores.

3.2.4 Outcome, Explanatory, and Control Variables

Conflict is the main outcome variable. It is a dichotomous indicator for a US use of force. I exclude threats or demonstrations of force as these may be bargaining tactics rather than evidence of bargaining failures. The outcome coding corresponds to whether the US actions were costly in that US military assets caused or suffered destruction due to behavior the president ordered or authorized. In many instances this falls short of typical definitional thresholds for war. Nonetheless, lower intensity conflicts are suitable cases of bargaining failure as the costs associated with them still generate inefficiencies that require explanation. Providing arms or assistance to an aligned force does not qualify (as during the Six Day War) unless there is overt US military action or oversight (as in Indonesia in 1958 and the Bay of Pigs). For intra-war observations with the possibility of escalation, the mere response to an attack does not qualify—such as rolling back the Tet Offensive. I only code the variable one when there is a significant expansion of the extant operation—such as mining North Vietnamese harbors.

Certainty is the main explanatory variable. It reflects the percentage of total words in each observation that express uncertainty subtracted from the maximum uncertainty score. A measure of certainty, as opposed to uncertainty, eases interpretation of the results. To test the anticipated conditional relationship between certainty and conflict, I use an indicator variable for the magnitude of State Department involvement. To reflect the State Department’s role, I calculate the share of total words per observation that come from State Department officials, which varies from 0% to over 50%. State Involvement is coded one for observations above the median value and zero otherwise. Recall that the extent of State Department involvement proxies for the presence of overprecision errors and conditions the relationship between certainty and conflict.

I control for variables that might confound the relationship between certainty and conflict—

\[ \text{State Involvement} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if State Department involvement above median value} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \]

\[ \text{Certainty} = \frac{\text{Total words expressing uncertainty}}{\text{Maximum uncertainty score}} \]

\[ \text{Conflict} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if US use of force} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \]

\[ \text{Certainty} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if State Department involvement above median value} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \]

\[ \text{State Involvement} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if State Department involvement above median value} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \]

\[ \text{Results are robust to varying the cut point, as shown in the Appendix.} \]
that is, variables that are a common cause of the explanatory and outcome variables. Summary statistics for all variables are in the Appendix.

- **Relative Capabilities:** The balance of capabilities between the US and the target likely affects both certainty and conflict. Dyads near parity purportedly have relatively high degrees of asymmetric information and are more conflict prone (Reed 2003; Bennett and Stam 2004). The variable uses CINC scores to measure US capabilities over the sum of US and target capabilities (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972).

- **Regime Type:** A target state’s regime type can influence uncertainty through multiple pathways. For instance, if media transparency correlates with regime type and transparency reduces uncertainty, then there will be less uncertainty when confronting more liberal regimes. The vast democratic peace literature (Oneal, Russett, and Berbaum 2003) finds that target regime type affects US willingness to use force. I use Polity IV scores (Marshall and Jaggers 2002) to measure regime type.

- **Proximity:** Geographic proximity increases the likelihood of conflict. It might plausibly reduce uncertainty if greater distances impede intelligence gathering. The variable reflects kilometers between capital cities (Gleditsch and War 2001).

- **Party:** Holding an extreme political ideology correlates with overprecision, with the relationship being more pronounced for conservatives (Ortoleva and Snowberg 2015). The variable is an indicator equal to one for Republican presidents and zero otherwise.

- **Age:** Older individuals might be more prone to unwarranted certainty (Ortoleva and Snowberg 2015). Additionally, older leaders in democracies are more likely to engage in conflict (Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam 2005). The variable measures the president’s age.

- **Non-state Enemy:** Some observations in the data set are opportunities to use force against non-state actors. For instance, threats to Jordan’s King Hussein during the 1950s led the US to consider using force. The US may have less intelligence about non-state actors and a different disposition toward conflict with them. I control for this with a binary variable.
• *Combat* captures a president’s exposure to combat with Nixon and Carter equal to zero and all others equal to one. Leaders with combat experience are less likely to use force than those who served but never saw combat (Horowitz and Stam 2014).

### 3.3 Results

I begin the results presentation with descriptive plots of the data before turning to regressions. Figure 3.3 plots the key explanatory and outcome variables. The left panel plots the relationship between certainty and conflict, showing a weak association in the direction expected by typical bargaining models. The right panel differentiates observations based on the level of State Department involvement. Greater certainty in observations with high State involvement (blue circles) is clearly associated with peace. This relationship is muted and slightly reversed for observations with limited State involvement (red diamonds). Relationships observed in the data before making parametric assumptions accord with the theory.

![Descriptive Plots of Certainty and Force](image)

**Figure 3.3:** Descriptive plots of the data. Left panel shows the unconditional relationship between certainty and conflict. Right panel differentiates by State Department involvement.
I now ensure the relationships hold when controlling for likely confounders. The first test evaluates the standard rationalist prediction, stated in Hypothesis 1a, that greater certainty decreases conflict probability. After showing limited support for this contention I evaluate State Department involvement. This analysis demonstrates that State officials express greater uncertainty and that their involvement moderates the certainty-conflict relationship in accordance with Hypothesis 2.

Rationalist bargaining theories of war predict a monotonic relationship with the probability of conflict decreasing in certainty. Model 1 of Table 3.2 tests this prediction with a bivariate regression of conflict on the certainty measure. Due to the binary outcome variable I use logistic regression. While the coefficient on certainty is in the predicted direction, it falls short of conventional levels of statistical significance. Greater certainty is only weakly associated with peace.

Controlling for potential confounding variables in Model 2 strengthens the substantive and statistical relationship between certainty and conflict ($p = 0.09$). Figure 3.4 plots the relationship between the variables. As the lower line in Figure 2.1 suggests, certainty corresponds with peace. In simulations shifting the certainty explanatory variable from its 25th to 75th percentile values, conflict probability drops from a baseline rate of 24% by 11% points but with 95% confidence bounds spanning from a -32% to 1% point change.

As noted earlier, 15 observations qualify for the sample through more ad hoc criteria. I drop these observations to assess robustness to various sampling procedures. Doing so attenuates the baseline rationalist prediction linking certainty to peace as shown in Model 3. Another potential limitation of the data is that the volume of documentary evidence varies across observations. Unsurprisingly, there is more text for the Cuban Missile Crisis than for the Jordanian troubles in 1957. The total word count for observations varies between 68 and 12,306. To ensure that results are not dependent on observations with limited available evidence, I drop all cases with fewer than 500 total words which reduces the sample to 51 observations. As shown in Model 4, Certainty does not reach statistical significance in this specification. In sum, the evidence is directionally consistent with predictions from the
traditional rationalist framework but often does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Table 3.2: Certainty and Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>-0.62*</td>
<td>-0.74</td>
<td>-0.66</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.36)</td>
<td>(0.52)</td>
<td>(0.48)</td>
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<td>State Dept Involvement</td>
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<td>-2.06**</td>
<td>-1.69*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.89)</td>
<td>(1.04)</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.95)</td>
<td>(1.07)</td>
<td>(0.98)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Capabilities</td>
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<td>14.68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11.48)</td>
<td>(12.32)</td>
<td>(9.79)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
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<td>(1.29)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>-7.97</td>
<td>-8.16</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(1.19)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51</td>
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</table>

*p < 0.1 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

Notes: Logistic regression with opportunities to use force as unit of analysis. Models 1 and 2 include the full sample of observations. Model 3 includes only those observations in ICB or meeting Blechman and Kaplan’s levels one and two uses of force. Model 4 excludes observations with fewer than 500 words of text.

3.3.1 State Department Involvement as a Moderator

I now consider how high State Department involvement affects estimated certainty and moderates the relationship of interest. Implication A of Hypothesis 2 is that conditional on
the observation, State Department officials, less prone to overprecision, will estimate more uncertainty than elites from other branches. To test this implication I construct observation level uncertainty scores split by institutional affiliation. Each speaker is assigned one of six bureaucratic roles. These categories are President, State Department, Defense Department, CIA, JCS, and White House advisers which consists of National Security Council staff and other advisers. I account for observation-specific factors by de-meaning each bureaucracy’s uncertainty score by that observation’s aggregate uncertainty score. This within-observation approach yields cleaner comparisons than a between-observation approach that requires controlling for all confounders.

The results presented in Figure 3.5 are consistent with the hypothesis. Boxplots show the range of de-meaned uncertainty values for the State Department versus all other institutions.

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10Some speakers from departments that rarely appear in security discussions—such as the Treasury Department—are excluded from this analysis.
Figure 3.5: Uncertainty by institution. Boxplot shows uncertainty by institution adjusting for crisis level factors. Bold line indicates median, box length spans from the first to third quartile values, and whiskers extend to minimum and maximum values. The Other category encompasses Defense, CIA, JCS, the President, and White House Staff.

across the observations. The aggregated State Department estimate tends to be more uncertain than estimates from other institutions. Regressing the de-meaned uncertainty scores on a dummy for State Department confirms this relationship ($p < 0.01$). Conditional on crisis specific factors, State officials estimate greater uncertainty. This provides evidence consistent with the second pathway toward executive level overprecision whereby advisers themselves are overprecise which only exacerbates problems associated with incomplete information solicitation processes.

Does high State Department involvement condition, or moderate, the relationship between certainty and conflict? As stated in Implication B, I expect certainty decreases conflict

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11 I exclude instances where an institution had less than 200 words of total text for an observation. Results are substantively similar without this restriction.

12 This relationship holds ($p < 0.02$) when excluding all observations from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which are more certain on average.
likelihood when the State Department is heavily involved and increases it (or is approximately flat) otherwise. Models 5 and 6 of Table 3.3 test this contention by interacting the State Department variable with the certainty score, without and with controls respectively. In both specifications the coefficient on the interaction term is negative and statistically significant. Substantively this suggests that the relationship between certainty and conflict differs depending on State Department involvement. This accords with the theory’s prediction that the slopes of the association between certainty and conflict should differ depending on whether certainty stems from quality information, as proxied by State Department involvement. A likelihood ratio test between Models 2 and 6 confirms that including the interaction improves the model’s fit ($p < 0.05$).

I simulate substantive quantities from Model 6 for cases with and without high State Department involvement to facilitate interpretation. Figure 3.6 plots the results. When State is central to the estimative process—such as when Johnson confronted the Pueblo incident—certainty reduces conflict likelihood. Shifting the certainty variable from the 25th to 75th percentile in such cases reduces the conflict probability by 17% points (with 95% confidence bounds of $-54\%$,-1%) from a baseline probability of 24%. That is, increasing certainty when the State Department is heavily involved is associated with a nearly 75% relative decline in the likelihood of conflict. When certainty is more likely to be warranted, or based on quality information, it is associated with peace. In contrast, in the half of the sample with low State involvement—such as during Bay of Pigs deliberations—there is likely overprecision and the certainty-conflict relationship flips directions. This finding is robust to using alternative sampling criteria as shown in Models 7 and 8.

Recall that results will not be biased in favor of finding an interactive effect even if the president is predisposed toward a peaceful outcome and thus selects to have high State Department involvement. The primary effect of interest is not whether high State Department involvement is associated with peace, which likely suffers from selection bias. Instead, I assess whether certainty is associated with peace conditional on high State Department involvement.
Table 3.3: State Department: Moderating Certainty and Conflict

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<td>12.65*</td>
<td>14.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.17)</td>
<td>(3.84)</td>
<td>(7.31)</td>
<td>(6.68)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Certainty*State Dept</td>
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<td>-1.73**</td>
<td>-3.32**</td>
<td>-3.60**</td>
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<td>(2.27)</td>
<td>(21.37)</td>
<td>(20.76)</td>
<td>(15.75)</td>
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N: 61  61  46  51

Notes: Logistic regression with opportunities to use force as unit of analysis. Models 5 and 6 include the full sample of observations. Model 7 includes only those observations in ICB or meeting Blechman and Kaplan’s levels one and two uses of force. Model 8 excludes observations with fewer than 500 words of text.

The results strongly accord with the hypothesis that certainty’s sources moderate the relationship between certainty and conflict. High State Department involvement affects estimated certainty in a manner consistent with there being less overprecision. In such cases, certainty is associated with peace as predicted. When State involvement is low, the sign of the relationship flips.
Figure 3.6: Predicted probabilities of conflict across the range of certainty values with 95% confidence intervals. Based on Model 6 where State Department involvement moderates the relationship. Rug plot shows data distribution.

3.4 Robustness and Alternative Explanations

This section addresses robustness specifications (results shown in the Appendix) and then speaks to alternative explanations that might be consistent with the findings. Initial checks examine alternative specifications and control variables. I control for Experience, which reflects the president’s time in office. Lessons from prior crises may affect subsequent crisis decision-making (Potter 2007). However, I find no evidence for this contention and all results for the core explanatory variables remain unchanged. Additionally, I interact Experience with Certainty and find no evidence that prior experience moderates the relationship between certainty and conflict. This is consistent with leaders struggling to recognize and correct overprecision errors. Perhaps learning or changing dispositions toward assessment certainty and using force occurs at the national level, rather than the individual level. For instance, a war weary public could limit the viability of using force in subsequent disputes.
However, incorporating a time trend or a *Recent War* variable measuring years since the last costly US war (Korea or Vietnam) does not substantively change the results. Results are similarly unchanged when including control variables for the number of unique speakers in an observation, whether an attack against US forces sparked the observation, or the observation included a compellent threat [Sechser 2011]. Results are also substantively and statistically similar when dropping leverage points or observations from various crises within the Vietnam War, which constitute 8 of the 61 observations.

Other robustness tests use alternative standard error specifications. These include clustering errors on the presidential administration or the opponent as well as calculating bootstrapped standard errors with and without clustering. The central result showing the State Department’s moderating effect remains statistically significant at conventional levels across all models.

Two additional checks support important assumptions. First, there is no meaningful difference in either the certainty scores across the two document types—memos versus transcripts—or the mix of document types for State Department speaker texts versus texts from other branches. This assures that higher State Department uncertainty is due to substantive differences, rather than mechanical ones. Second, I examine the most important speakers in each administration measured by amount of text. The information aggregation process assumes that a speaker’s volume of text is representative of his importance for the final aggregated assessment. A concern is that the president’s most important advisers may need few words to meaningfully shape the president’s final estimate. As shown in an Appendix table, the assumption appears justified as the corpus mirrors the well-known prominence of key advisers, such as John Foster Dulles, Kissinger, and Brzezinski.

### 3.4.1 Small Sample Size

The relatively small sample of observations could impede estimation and inferences. Though there are few rules for what constitutes a sufficient sample size, some suggest Type II errors, or false negatives, are particularly likely when using maximum likelihood estimation
with less than 30 observations per independent variable (Hart and Clark 1999). Small samples can also bias logit estimates away from zero (Firth 1993; McCaskey and Rainey n.d.). I address these concerns in three ways. First, I estimate all models using least squares because it requires less from the data than logit models. Second, I use Firth’s (1993) penalized maximum likelihood estimate which reduces both bias and variance. Results for the State Department moderation effect remain substantively and statistically significant across both tests, while there is little support for the baseline rationalist hypothesis.

Third, I use randomization inference which does not require an appeal to large samples or parametric models as randomization itself provides a “reasoned basis for causal inference” (Fisher 1935; Rosenbaum 2002; Glynn and Ichino forthcoming). The intuition is that the observed data represents one realization of randomizations of the explanatory variable values across the observations. If a sharp null effect holds, the observed relationship between the realized explanatory variable values and the outcome variables should not significantly differ from the relationship observed in alternative randomization realizations. Put differently, permuting explanatory variable values across observations while holding outcomes fixed should produce substantively similar relationships between the variables to the one observed in the actual data if the null effect holds.

I run 5,000 randomizations for each of the main models (Models 2 and 6) and calculate a test statistic for each. Figure 3.7 plots the distribution of these test statistics. The left edge of the fill under the density curve indicates the test statistic from the observed data. Focusing on the State Department moderating effect (right panel), only 3% of realizations have a test statistic more extreme than the one found in the data. Results are less compelling for the baseline rationalist model. In sum, State Department involvement conditions the relationship between certainty and conflict across many robustness tests.

13The Appendix contains a more detailed account of the procedure for calculating the test statistic.
Figure 3.7: Randomization inference results. Portions of density plots with blue fill represent the percentage of randomizations that produce a test statistic more extreme than those observed in the actual data.

3.4.2 State Department Officials: Marginalization and Assessments

It is substantively important to understand when the State Department assumes a limited role. Although this process does not bias results in favor of the hypothesis as discussed elsewhere, it could have implications for the generalizability of the results. For instance, if the background covariates systematically differ between high and low State Department observations, then the relationship between certainty and conflict in the latter case may not be applicable to the former. There is some systematic variation as State Department involvement is higher when the balance of capabilities is more favorable, the opponent is less autocratic, or the opponent is a non-state actor. However, the central result holds after accounting for these differences either through pruning the data—such as excluding cases involving the USSR to improve balance on relative capabilities—or through propensity score matching (Sekhon 2011). There is little evidence that State Department officials are systematically excluded when crises are highly militarized. For instance, compellent threats and crisis-initiating attacks against US forces have no statistically significant effect
on whether State Department officials are highly involved. Though some factors affect the role of State Department officials, relevant counterfactuals do exist and the core finding of a conditional relationship between certainty and conflict persists within a sample of more comparable observations.

I theorize that State Department officials have greater uncertainty due to their attention to and recognition of the complexity of estimating opponents’ political attributes. However, there are plausible alternative explanations for their elevated uncertainty. Individuals who select into the State Department may systematically differ from those in other bureaucracies. There is evidence that they are more liberal (Milner and Tingley 2015) and more likely to be generalized trusters (Rathbun 2012). If either characteristic is associated with less cognitive closure or ambiguity aversion, it could account for State Department officials expressing greater uncertainty (Jost et al. 2007). More generally, there is evidence that elites vary in their cognitive dispositions (for example, Hermann (1980); Hafner-Burton et al. (2014)). If the case, pre-existing dispositions rather than job-specific factors cause higher uncertainty. Empirically assessing this alternative is difficult but one crude test is to examine assessments by officials who held multiple roles. Kissinger is the most notable example, having served as the National Security Advisor (NSA) before becoming Secretary of State. Conditional on observation factors, Kissinger exhibited greater uncertainty when with the State Department, going from being more certain than the average while NSA to less certain when with State. Though subject to confounding, such as having gained experience while NSA, this is at least consistent with my argument as opposed to a pure selection account.

Another possibility is that State Department officials strategically invoke greater uncertainty. Doing so may reflect skepticism about military force’s efficacy, belief in diplomacy’s ability to persuade other states, or a debating tactic to marshall resources toward diplomatic efforts. Strategic communication of this sort raises the prospect of cheap talk whereby messages by State Department officials expressing high uncertainty are discounted when choosing whether to use force. If diplomats strategically use uncertainty to encourage peaceful outcomes, then instances where State Department officials express high certainty
should produce a high probability of conflict. However, there is no empirical support for this conjecture as I find no relationship between State’s certainty score and the probability of conflict. This is consistent with my theory and inconsistent with a theory of bureaucratic preference divergence and strategic communication.

Two additional alternative explanations merit attention. First, the theory and empirics assume the US has incomplete information about the adversary and not vice-versa—that is, there is no two-sided uncertainty. This could bias results if US adversaries consistently have higher uncertainty about US resolve (and/or capabilities) in instances with low State Department involvement. If the case, then the apparently null relationship between US certainty and conflict might be attributable to an adversary’s persistently high uncertainty. Though plausible, I am skeptical of this argument. The US policy-making process is more transparent than it is for any of the adversaries in the data set, all of which are autocracies. Greater transparency reduces the extent of uncertainty for an adversary. More speculatively, it is tough to imagine that adversary uncertainty over US attributes is only affecting results in those cases with low State Department involvement. When State is included in the process, the relationship between certainty and conflict conforms with rationalist expectations, apparently undisturbed by the adversary’s degree of uncertainty. Put differently, I am unaware of a theoretically compelling argument linking the degree of State Department involvement to the extent of an adversary’s uncertainty over US attributes.

Second, bargaining should be possible in observations used to test bargaining models of war. Perhaps actors have already abandoned bargaining in some observations, particularly those with low State involvement. Rather than indicating overprecision, such conditions could convey a preexisting decision to use force, in which case the degree of certainty is irrelevant. I address this contention by coding all crises on whether leaders had plausibly already abandoned diplomacy. For instance, during deliberations over covert CIA interventions—e.g., Guatemala, Indonesia, and Cuba—decision makers may have already abandoned hopes for bargaining. Chapter 4 argues and demonstrates at length that this was not the case, at least for Cuba. Nonetheless, my central result persists, albeit at modestly attenuated levels,
when models control for possible bargaining abandonment.

3.4.3 Pessimism, Uncertainty, and Bureaucratic Politics

Another potential critique is that uncertainty is really a proxy for pessimism and State Department officials are simply more pessimistic about using force. Using a carefully pruned version of the “Ngtv” dictionary from General Inquirer, I construct a pessimism score for each text in the identical fashion to the uncertainty variable. Doing so addresses multiple concerns. First, the uncertainty measure is not a proxy for pessimism, at least as reflected in these dictionaries. The correlation across all speaker texts is -0.05 and across all observations is -0.11. That is, greater uncertainty correlates with slightly less pessimism. Second, State Department officials are not systematically more pessimistic in their assessments. De-meaned for observation-specific factors, the average State Department estimate is statistically indistinguishable from the overall estimate. Officials from State have greater uncertainty, not greater pessimism. Third, including Pessimism as a control variable does not alter the substantive results for the main explanatory variables and there is no statistically significant relationship between Pessimism and conflict. This is consistent with bargaining theory which emphasizes uncertainty in estimates, not the values of estimates themselves, as a cause of war.

Fourth, I again find little evidence consistent with a bureaucratic politics model of communication and information aggregation. If such models are accurate, State Department officials being more optimistic relative to those from other agencies should be associated with a higher probability of using force. Because these officials are expected to be pessimistic, it is only when they go against type that their message is integrated into the final estimate. Department of Defense officials should have the inverse relationship where their pessimistic assessments should reduce the likelihood of using force because it counters expectations. However, neither of these appear in the data. These findings are inconsistent with a cheap talk model of information aggregation and instead support my assumption of

\[14\] All findings are similar without pruning the dictionary.
preference alignment and effective communication.

3.5 Conclusion

Strategic choices are contingent on actor beliefs. Measuring beliefs is thus a pivotal task for conflict scholars but also an exceedingly problematic one. This chapter adopts a new approach for resolving this impediment to empirically testing prominent theories of conflict as well as the new one offered in Chapter 2. Private deliberations and memoranda offer more direct proxies for certainty at the central decision-making unit than previous studies have provided. A dictionary-based approach provides flexibility for constructing measures at various levels of analysis crucial for evaluating certainty at the bureaucracy as well as the crisis level. Thus this chapter offers a new approach for capturing decision-maker certainty and taking beliefs seriously.

Corroborating theoretical expectations, diplomats express greater uncertainty than peers conditional on the observation. This is consistent with a pathway to executive-level overprecision that incorporates marginalization in the interagency process and adviser-level overprecision. More importantly, the extent of State Department involvement in assessment processes conditions the relationship between certainty and war. Conditional on high State Department engagement, certainty is associated with peace, as rationalist models predict. Assessments soliciting informational input from the full range of bureaucracies are less prone to overprecision and more likely to accord with rationalist predictions. In the converse conditions, assessments likely suffer from overprecision. Marginalizing input from those with unique expertise and points of emphasis promotes unwarranted certainty and departs from rationalist expectations. Certainty is no longer associated with peace and may increase the probability of war.

\[\text{That said, subsequent efforts may abandon the dictionary-based approach and instead opt for machine learning methods that are potentially easier to validate. Additionally, future work may categorize texts based on their content—e.g., political versus military—rather than strictly on their character—e.g., degree of uncertainty. The theory predicts diplomats are more likely to invoke uncertainty over political attributes, which is untested in this chapter.}\]
Conclusions from this chapter accord with implications from the theory. However, the quantitative tests cannot assess the full causal chain laid out in Chapter 2. For instance, the measures cannot capture the “true” underlying distribution and thus cannot directly assess whether estimates are overprecise. Instead the statistical analyses look for implications consistent with overprecision. Case studies in the next two chapters help fill this void, as well as others. I posit that it is certainty over political attributes that affect expected conflict outcomes that drives overprecision. Again, this supposition escapes quantitative analysis whereas qualitative studies are well-suited for verifying the contention. Obviously the prior point further implies that the specific content of the political attributes in question are unspecified. A careful analysis of the Bay of Pigs and Iraq War offers concreteness, delineating the substantive issue subject to overprecision. Finally, this chapter hints at variables correlated with State Department marginalization but has little to offer on the selection process beyond noting that this process is unlikely to bias results in my favor. Case studies offer inductive insights into why leaders marginalize State’s input. Chapters 4 and 5 help address limitations in the current chapter through the lenses of the Bay of Pigs and Iraq War respectively.
4 Bay of Pigs: Prospects for Protests

It is obvious that ultimate success will depend upon political factors; i.e., a sizable popular uprising.
–Joint Chiefs of Staff

The ‘need-to-know’ standard—i.e., that no one should be told about the project unless it becomes operationally necessary—thus had the idiotic effect of excluding much of the expertise of the government at a time when every alert newspaperman knew something was afoot.
–Arthur Schlesinger (Schlesinger 1965, p. 248)

I stood right here at Ike’s desk and told him I was certain our Guatemalan operation would succeed, and, Mr. President, the prospects for this plan are even better than they were for that one.
–Allen Dulles (Sorensen 1965, p. 296)

4.1 Castro’s Consolidation and Bargaining Failure

Castro’s unexpectedly resolved and competent forces routed a US-organized, trained, and equipped brigade of Cuban exiles at Playa Giron in April 1961. The operational shortcomings behind the “perfect failure” at the Bay of Pigs beggar belief (Higgins 1987). But before the mission could spectacularly fail, there was the critical decision to launch the mission at all. Why expend over $64 million (over $500mm in 2016), destroy valuable assets in the course of fighting, and most critically make decisions resulting in the deaths of over 1,600 Cuban soldiers, 114 Brigade members, and four American pilots (Jones 2008, p. 122,

¹ Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, February 3, 1961, FRUS, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962, Document 35.
Wyden 1979, p. 303, Kirkpatrick 1962? Why couldn’t conflicting interests between the US and Cuba be resolved more efficiently through negotiations? I illustrate how highly certain estimates of the strength of political opposition and likelihood of popular anti-Castro uprisings were pivotal in the bargaining breakdown that culminated in the US folly on Cuba’s southern coast.

When authorizing the Bay of Pigs operation, President Kennedy believed that the amphibious landing would initiate popular uprisings against Castro and military defections that would eventually topple the extant regime. Senior CIA officials, such as Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles, and Deputy Director, Plans Richard Bissell provided assessments that shaped Kennedy’s expectation. Based on reports from dissident sources on the island, they estimated a robust opposition lay in waiting and accordingly equipped the Brigade with an extra 30,000 rifles to distribute to these friendly forces. Officials from the State Department and elsewhere expressed greater uncertainty about the prospects for uprisings, noting Castro’s rapid expansion of the state’s ability to police the populace. Unfortunately, officials marginalized these views for reasons discussed below and CIA’s estimate held sway, leading Kennedy and his senior advisors to believe that the expected outcome of conflict was more favorable than abiding the status quo in bilateral relations. Contrary to the prevailing estimate, defections were limited and popular uprisings were non-existent as Castro’s forces arrested up to 200,000 potential dissidents in the 48 hours preceding the landing. Castro routed the Brigade within three days.

This chapter provides qualitative evidence corroborating the dissertation’s theory and quantitative tests offered in preceding chapters. The theory predicts that when officials from the US State Department have little input in assessment processes, estimates concerning an adversary’s political attributes are likely to be overprecise. These overprecise estimates generate overly demanding bargaining proposals from the US, which adversaries reject. Statistical tests assess implications consistent with the theory, but cannot assess each link in the causal chain.

This chapter illustrates the full logic of the theory in the context of US-Cuban relations
from Castro’s assumption of power in January 1959 through the Bay of Pigs operation in April 1961. The narrative and analysis that follows establishes key factors consistent with the theoretical expectations. To begin, it specifies what the two sides were bargaining over—with emphases on the extent of Communist influence in the Castro regime, protection of US investments on the island, and Cuba’s annual sugar quota—and how the division of these contested stakes shifted over time. Moreover, it demonstrates that bargaining did occur, through implicit and explicit channels.

Next, the chapter evaluates each theoretical contention in the causal chain that ties overprecise estimates to the use of force. First, I establish that Cuba’s political attributes affected US estimates of what could be obtained through the use of force. These attributes included the strength of internal opposition to Castro, the proficiency of Castro’s state apparatus to police the populace, and the resulting likelihood of uprisings against the regime. Assessments of Castro’s consolidation of power were pivotal in the decision to use force. Officials from all branches of government conceded that the assault stood little chance of success without popular uprisings. Second, the prevailing estimate for the likelihood and scope of popular uprisings was narrow and lacked uncertainty. CIA planners of the operation estimated that there was widespread latent opposition to Castro. While cognizant of the expanding police-state measures at Castro’s disposal, Dulles and Bissell relied on human intelligence flowing from sources in Cuba indicating that popular uprisings would overwhelm these regime capacities. Kennedy, and others, primarily relied on CIA analysis to shape their own assessments.

Third, not all advisers shared the prevailing estimate and its attendant uncertainty. Officials from the State Department as well as from Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and even some within CIA, noted that available information suggested greater uncertainty was warranted over the probability of uprisings. These officials flagged the dueling trends of increasing disaffection with Castro’s embrace of Communism offset by the growing police-state powers as a source of uncertainty. If the Cuban regime could clamp down on the opposition, prospects for uprisings were less certain than CIA estimated.
Fourth, I establish that the CIA and Presidential estimate was overprecise. This is evident ex ante as those looking at alternative information sources believed greater uncertainty was warranted. Though difficult to establish, overprecision is also evident ex post. Castro’s control of the population turned out to be far greater than envisioned in even the CIA’s worst-case scenario. Airstrikes two days before the night landings served to alert Castro. He promptly arrested 100,000 to 200,000 potential dissidents, including all significant CIA “assets.” Mass incarceration of potential opponents and a lack of popular uprisings upon the landing are suggestive of an estimate that ignored plausible potential outcomes.

Fifth, I link the overprecise estimate to the onerous US bargaining demands. Expected conflict outcomes shape the bargains states are willing to accept. State’s demand peaceful settlements at least as attractive as what they anticipate they could secure through force. Because US officials believed that political conditions in Cuba would yield a favorable military outcome, they sought a favorable negotiated settlement. Consequently, US officials deemed the depth of Communist influence and uncompensated expropriation of US investments untenable. US rejection of the status quo and its demands (both explicit and implicit) for a more favorable outcome led to a breakdown in bargaining.

Sixth, there is compelling evidence that State Department input was minimal and marginalized during the assessment processes. This minimal role, while evident in the Eisenhower administration, was even starker in the early months of the Kennedy administration. Kennedy was immediately frustrated with State’s glacial pace. It was a comparatively risk averse and slow-moving department. Secretary Rusk’s non-assertive personality exacerbated this frustration. Decision-making procedures, which emphasized secrecy and ad hoc fora, further diminished the input of sources whose expertise would normally be sought—State’s intelligence branch (INR) was forbidden from studying the assault’s prospects.

Beyond establishing the basic parameters and links of the theory, the case study serves as a means by which to address a variety of potential critiques. These include selection concerns pertaining to why the State Department had little influence. The case demonstrates that State’s limited role was not due to the President’s pre-existing policy preference but
rather due to the aforementioned factors. Moreover, the study shows that it was not Cuban uncertainty about US attributes that drove the inefficient outcome. The presence of a US-trained force of Cuban exiles in Guatemala was widely known throughout Latin America and the Soviets and Castro repeatedly predicted that the US intended to use it. Analysis further reveals that erroneous estimates about Cuba’s military attributes cannot explain the bargaining failure and neither can issue indivisibility or commitment problems. Finally, the study sheds light on the sources of overprecision, revealing the importance of selective exposure and resulting correlational neglect. I return to these points when evaluating alternative explanations and in the chapter’s conclusion.

On the details of the assault itself, this chapter highlights an important but often overlooked element in historical accounts of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. The operational plan hinged on the political conditions inside Cuba. The President, Joint Chiefs, civilian Pentagon officials, and State Department officials all believed that prompt uprisings were essential for the operation to have any chance of success. Otherwise Castro’s 200,000 strong militia and 30,000 man army would surely overrun the 1,500 man expeditionary force. Yet the story of how the CIA came to believe, and in turn convinced others, that such uprisings were almost certain to occur is often lost in accounts of the operation. In addition, rather than the decision-theoretic lens scholars typically employ (Janis 1982), this chapter situates the Bay of Pigs in a strategic framework necessary for explicating why the adversaries could not reach a mutually preferable bargain.

Highlighting the estimates of Cuban political attributes, and their importance in US decision-making, comes at the expense of devoting attention to the legendary operational failures that undermined the landing. This chapter does not attempt to recount or explain the sources of the multitude of flaws inherent in the plan—such as the viability of the guerrilla option for the Brigade, cancellation of D-Day airstrikes, failed diversionary landings, insistence on US deniability (already implausible) and its implications for military viability, and mistimed air support. The scope and array of these failures are justifiably
well-documented elsewhere.²

The chapter proceeds as follows. I start by establishing the bargaining preliminaries: the stakes, how their division evolved, and that bargaining did occur between the adversaries. The following section concerns CIA’s (and subsequently the President’s) estimates regarding Castro’s consolidation of political power and the likelihood that the Brigade’s landing would spark popular uprisings. I establish the high certainty of the prevailing estimate and that this certainty was unwarranted as evidenced by both alternative estimates available at the time and the realized outcome. Next, I illustrate how overprecise assessments contributed to the bargaining failure. A subsequent section documents the State Department’s marginalization and its causes. The final section considers counter-arguments and divergences between theoretical expectations and facts of the case. These include whether bargaining failure stemmed from information problems associated with overprecision, as I suggest, versus problems of overoptimism, shifts in power, or divergent bureaucratic preferences, particularly at CIA.

4.2 Communist Influence, Expropriation, and Sugar

The theory proceeds from the contention that the use of military force represents an inefficiency stemming from bargaining failures. A natural point of departure for qualitative discussions of bargaining failures is the issue being bargained over and the prevailing division between the adversaries of that issue or resource. The US-Cuban stakes preceding the Bay of Pigs were multifaceted. A slate of policy items constituted the contested resource between the two parties. I focus on three: (1) the extent of Communist influence in the Castro regime, (2) protection and compensation for US investments in Cuba, and (3) Cuba’s annual sugar quota. Given the vantage point of the case study, the presentation is admittedly slanted to prioritizing the issues of greatest prominence to US officials.

The content and character of the Castro regime was the foremost issue in dispute. Specifically, US officials’ greatest concern was the extent of Communist influence. A number of

²Among others, see Schlesinger (1965); Higgins (1987); Wyden (1979); Kirkpatrick (1962).
constitutive elements fall under this umbrella. Castro and US officials were concerned with the political leaning of the individuals occupying high positions in the Cuban government. Officials were also concerned about the role of Cuba’s Communist party, the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) in public institutions. Additionally, the US contested Cuban ties to the Soviet Union and the risk of granting the Soviets a foothold in the Caribbean. Cuban voting behavior in the United Nations and efforts to undermine US-allied regimes in the region were similarly worrisome.

Treatment of US economic interests in Cuba was a second contested issue. Though sympathetic to land and economic reforms following Batista’s demise, US officials were pre-occupied with insuring swift and just compensation for any damages or seizures of US investments on the island. These investments—in sugar mills, cattle ranches, oil refineries, public utilities, mining operations, tourist infrastructure, and additional sectors—were valued at approximately $800 million at the time Castro assumed power.

Annual sugar imports from Cuba at an above market price constituted a third issue at stake. Sugar represented 70% of Cuban exports to the US, which received roughly one-third of its annual sugar consumption from trade with Cuba. Congress historically set the sugar quota and price. As bilateral relations deteriorated, these powers were delegated to the president.

4.2.1 Communist Influence: Evolution of the Status Quo

Batista’s Cuba was cemented in the US bloc, staking out a firm anti-Communist stance. Beyond severing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, Batista provided favorable tax conditions to incentivize US private investment in Cuba, which quadrupled during his tenure (Morley 1987, p. 47, 51). However, bilateral ties eroded as Batista adopted repressive tactics to thwart opposition to his regime. In response, the US halted arms shipments to Cuba while

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3 The two states contested myriad additional issues. These included aid stabilization loans to the new regime, refining oil for Cuban consumption, sale of arms to Castro from third parties, the status of the US base at Guantanamo, and US patrol of flights harassing Cuba emanating from US territory, specifically Florida. Though all of consequence, for parsimony the rest of this section is primarily concerned with the three aforementioned issues.
Castro’s forces gained traction throughout 1958. US dispositions toward a potential Castro regime were lukewarm at best. In December 1958, Director Central Intelligence (DCI) Dulles warned the National Security Council (NSC) of Communist penetration into the Castro movement, despite Castro’s own limited effort to keep them out. Acting Secretary of State Herter echoed these concerns, causing the President to prefer finding a “third force”—not Batista and not Castro—to assume power (FRUS VI 188, 189). CIA officials twice met with potential third force leaders but failed to find viable alternatives, in part due to Castro’s growing power (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 7). Batista fled Cuba at year’s end and Castro triumphantly arrived in Havana on 8 January 1959.

The composition of Castro’s cabinet initially assuaged US concerns. State Department officials deemed it better than expected, “free from Communist taint,” and “basically friendly toward the United States” (FRUS VI 215, 217, Bonsal 1971, p. 35). US business leaders were similarly pleased. In late January, DCI Dulles testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the regime had no “Communist leanings” (Higgins 1987, p. 42).

Countering these positive impressions, the US Charge d’affaires in Havana warned that Raul Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara, both long thought to maintain radical leftist agendas, occupied prominent roles in the regime. Unbeknownst to US officials, both men were already reaching out to Moscow (FRUS VI 257, Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 11,15). The division of power between Communist and non-Communist interests within the Cuban regime steadily and continuously shifted toward the former. By late March Dulles warned of Communists operating openly and legally in Cuba. Officials from the State Department recognized that the PSP attained increasingly prominent roles in a variety of sectors in public life, including in labor movements, the armed forces, and media (FRUS VI 266, 278, 295).

Amidst growing concerns in the Eisenhower administration, Castro accepted the invi-

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4I use this shorthand to refer to documents from the Foreign Relations of the United States series. References are to either Volume VI, Cuba, 1958-1960 or Volume X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962, for the Eisenhower and Kennedy (roughly) periods respectively. Roman numerals refer to the volume and Arabic numerals refer to the document. I make extensive use of FRUS documents for this case. Though I anticipate supplementing these sources with items from the Kennedy Presidential Library will be fruitful, the FRUS volumes for the Bay of Pigs are incredibly comprehensive, containing the vast majority of documents referenced in the canonical historical accounts of the crisis.
tation of the American Society of Newspaper Editors to visit the United States in April 1959. Castro’s tour, which included a meal at the Harvard faculty club with future National Security Advisor and then Harvard Dean McGeorge Bundy, culminated with a multi-hour meeting with Vice President Nixon (administration officials intentionally withheld a meeting with the President). Nixon warned him of Communist influence and subversion. Nixon’s impressions are as follows [emphasis added]:

My own appraisal of him as a man is somewhat mixed. The one fact we can be sure of is that he has those indefinable qualities which make him a leader of men. Whatever we may think of him he is going to be a great factor in the development of Cuba and very possibly in Latin American affairs generally. He seems to be sincere. He is either incredibly naive about Communism or under Communist discipline—my guess is the former, and as I have already implied his ideas as to how to run a government or an economy are less developed than those of almost any world figure I have met in fifty countries. But because he has the power to lead to which I have referred, we have no choice but at least to try to orient him in the right direction (FRUS VI 287).

As Nixon suggests, the extent of Communist influence was the primary concern for US officials. One State Department official claims the singleminded goal of the Eisenhower administration for Cuba was to “keep Communism out” (Morley 1987 p. 41-42). Secretary of Defense McElroy recounted that as early as April 1959 Eisenhower felt Castro must be removed if he “turned” Communist (Morley 1987 p. 74).

The May Agrarian Reform Law, detailed below, caused a number of moderates to resign. A larger shake-up in October dissolved the cabinet with Raul Castro and Che assuming more prominent roles. Raul became head of the newly formed Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces. A November reshuffling granted Che control of the National Bank. Dulles and US Ambassador Bonsal deemed the regime “increasingly receptive to guidance by Communist oriented elements” (FRUS VI 399, 402).

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5 For instance, President Urrutia’s July resignation, and his replacement by staunch leftist Osvaldo Dorticos who drafted the Agrarian Reform Law, bolstered the Communist position (FRUS VI 341, Fursenko and Naftali 1997 p. 21).

6 The moderate commander of the Camaguey province Hubert Matos promptly resigned, stating his unwillingness to work for the Communist-leaning Raul (Fursenko and Naftali 1997 p. 31, Bonsal 1971 p. 100).
Within a year, Castro’s regime had steadily and dramatically shifted away from the US ideal point. Communist forces assumed prominent roles and Cuban-Soviet ties grew in the early months of 1960. Dulles reported close contact between their respective embassies in Mexico City, predicting a reinstatement of diplomatic relations. Months of communication culminated in Soviet First Deputy Premier Mikoyan’s February visit to Havana. The Soviets agreed to import mass quantities of Cuban sugar on favorable terms, providing a backstop against any punitive US actions on the prevailing quota. Moreover, the sides agreed to provide $100 million in trade credits to the Cubans, collaborate more closely in the UN, and reinstate diplomatic relations (Jones 2008, p. 17, Bonsal 1971, p. 131).

At a March NSC meeting, Dulles noted “continuing evidence of Communist activity in the operations of Castro and his government” and that the “Sino-Soviet Bloc continues its active support” (FRUS VI 483). Yet the evidence was insufficient to assert Cuba was under Soviet control. A March Special National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Fidel was not “demonstrably under the domination or control of the international Communist movement,” but is “in practice following the line set for Latin American Communist Parties” (FRUS VI 491). This distinction had consequences. OAS’ founding charter established a policy of non-intervention but the 1954 Caracas amendment opened a pathway for OAS-supported intervention in the event that a participating state fell under Communist control. Any hopes of an OAS-sanctioned US effort to intervene in Cuba were dashed by the insufficiency of evidence documenting Soviet domination of Cuban politics (FRUS VI 485).

Against this backdrop, on 17 March Eisenhower approved CIA’s plan for covert operations designed to replace Castro. As initially conceived, the plan called for the creation of a unified opposition to Castro, construction of a short wave radio broadcasting facility on Swan Island (reprising its role from the 1954 Guatemala operations against Arbenz), an “action” organization within Cuba, and a paramilitary force stationed and trained outside of Cuba (FRUS VI 481). This initial sketch, which Bissell developed and the Special

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See Fursenko and Naftali (1997).
Group supported would morph over the subsequent year into the Bay of Pigs operation. Eisenhower said that he “[knew] of no better plan for dealing with the situation” (FRUS VI 486).

The ball was set in motion toward the use of force. The division of the contested issue—the extent of Communist influence in the Castro regime—would only slide further from the US ideal point. By April the Soviets agreed to send East German, Czech, and Polish arms to Cuba (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 47). Soviet support was increasingly overt, exemplified by Krushchev’s July statement in the wake of the US cancellation of Cuba’s remaining sugar quota for 1960, detailed below. Krushchev stated “we for our part shall do everything to support Cuba” and reminded the US

> It should not be forgotten that the United States is not so inaccessibly distant from the Soviet Union as it used to be. Figuratively speaking, in case of need Soviet artillerymen can support the Cuban people with their rocket fire if the aggressive forces in the Pentagon dare to launch an intervention against Cuba. And let them not forget in the Pentagon that, as the latest tests have shown, we have rockets capable of landing directly in a precalculated square at a distance of 13,000 km. This, if you will, is a warning to those who would like to settle international issues by force and not by reason (FRUS VI 549).

A hug between Castro and Krushchev outside the former’s hotel in Harlem preceding UN General Assembly addresses provided the fitting visual of the prevailing dynamic. More substantively, by September Cuba was the non-bloc state that voted most frequently with the Soviet bloc in UN matters (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 60-61). Dulles stated the obvious in a September NSC meeting, deeming Cuba “virtually a member of the Communist Bloc.” Castro soon banned all political parties except the PSP, which had asserted control over essentially all major public institutions in Cuba (FRUS VI 583, 620).

Upon entering office, Dulles conveyed to Kennedy, without dissent from anyone, that “Cuba is now for practical purposes a Communist-controlled state” (FRUS X 30). In sum, a steady evolution in the prevalence of Communists within the Castro regime shifted the division of the contested “resource” or issue at stake. The status quo division of the top US

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8The Special Group was a body created by NSC 5412 to oversee covert operations.
priority was far from the US ideal point.

### 4.2.2 Expropriation and Termination

US officials encouraged Castro to implement economic and land reforms when he came to power. The State Department and Eisenhower saw the importance of undoing the oligarchic excesses of the Batista regime. Cognizant of this eventuality, US officials were concerned with the fair treatment of US investments on the island. These investments were worth an estimated $800 million at the start of 1959 and spanned economic sectors—e.g., telecommunications, sugar mills, cattle ranches, mining, and oil refineries. Castro alleviated concerns during his April 1959 visit, telling the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he had no intention to expropriate US properties (Wyden 1979, p. 27). However, within a month Cuba enacted the Agrarian Reform Law establishing the Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) which assumed increasing power over the following two years. The law limited land holdings to 3,333 acres, effectively reducing the largest sugar and cattle properties—both Cuban and American owned—by 90% and bringing 2.5 million acres under state control (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 18).

Thirty of the thirty-four American sugar mill owners, responsible for 35% of Cuban sugar production in the prior year, met with Ambassador Bonsal to voice their concerns of expropriation and compensation (FRUS VI 309). Bonsal brought the issue to Castro in a June 1959 meeting, pushing for “prompt, adequate, and effective compensation,” all of which Castro granted was reasonable and assured Bonsal that his government would fulfill its promises, with a significant caveat. That caveat being that compensation typically entails immediate cash payments but Castro and his Foreign Minister Roa considered this impossible given Cuba’s depleted reserves. Instead they planned to compensate the expropriated with 20 year bonds yielding no more than 4.5%. Though Bonsal deemed this arrangement fair, his superiors in Washington disagreed (Welch 1985, p. 36-37).

Prospects for US investment interests declined throughout the year. First came seizures of 400 large cattle ranches, US and Cuban owned, followed by seizures of US mining interests
in Oriente and Camaguey provinces. Interventions against the telephone and power utilities were next (FRUS VI 326, Morley 1987 p. 83-84). Following Eisenhower’s July 1960 cancellation of the sugar quota, Castro promulgated the Law of Nationalization. This stipulated that all compensation would come in the form of 30 year bonds yielding 2% with the crucial condition being that funding for these payments must come from proceeds of sugar sales to the US in excess of a quantity that would never be remotely approached, let alone surpassed. Confiscation became the status quo, with further seizures of US sugar interests in August (Bonsal 1971, p. 150-160). Additional nationalizations in October, involving the expropriation of 382 companies including all foreign banks, essentially ended private enterprise at any meaningful scale in Cuba (Morley 1987 p. 107). All told, over 1,000 corporations and 6,500 individuals filed claims in Washington with a sum value greater than $3 billion.

The annual sugar quota was another point of contention throughout this period. US law gave Cuba over 30% of the US sugar market with purchase prices well above world market rates. With relations deteriorating, Congressional reauthorization of the quota became a fraught subject. In June of 1959, Mann suggested granting the President autonomy to adjust and set the quota levels, circumventing the need for Congressional authorization (FRUS VI 313). Granted this authority in July 1960, Eisenhower cut 700,000 tons from the remaining sugar quota for the year. Given that the remaining quantity was only 744,000 tons, this amounted to a functional cutoff in sugar imports from Cuba. Months later, Eisenhower cut the 1961 quota to zero (FRUS VI 545, 594, Bonsal 1971 p. 151-160).

In sum, economic interests were central to US-Cuban relations. For years, US and Cuban officials successfully bargained over protection of US investments and the sugar quota.

9 Oil considerations escalated the dispute. A key component of Mikoyan’s February visit was an agreement to import Soviet oil. Beforehand, the 90,000 barrels per day refined by US (Esso and Texaco) and British (Shell) companies all came from imported Venezuelan crude (Morley 1987 p. 102-105). Executives from all three companies consulted with State and Treasury Department officials about refusing to refine Soviet imports, which Secretary of State Herter recognized would likely lead to expropriation of the refineries (FRUS VI 514). Affairs came to a head in June when Treasury Secretary Anderson informed the oil executives that refusal to refine Soviet oil would be in “accordance” with the US government’s policy—that is, there would be no anti-trust collusion considerations—though it was not demanded (FRUS VI 525). With American backing, the three companies refused to refine Soviet oil, leading to their predicted seizure in the final days of June (Bonsal 1971 p. 151-153).
From January 1959 until the Brigade’s assault at the Bay of Pigs, the two sides asserted increasingly strident positions. By the time of the amphibious landing, US investments were wiped out and the sugar allotment was eliminated.[10]

4.2.3 Explicit Negotiation Efforts

The tit-for-tat economic actions were indicative of increasingly strident bargaining positions. With each new maneuver, the division of the contested resources shifted. Though these actions arguably constitute implicit bargaining in international politics, more explicit negotiations, or at least their possible revival, punctuated bilateral relations during this period.

Ambassador Bonsal, consistently more optimistic about negotiation prospects, met with Castro both before and after the Agrarian Reform Act. Each time Bonsal voiced concerns about compensation and each time Castro reassured him (FRUS VI 320, 321, 359). The difficulties establishing a productive dialogue baffled Eisenhower: “their principal market is right here, their best market. You would think they would want good relationships. I don’t know exactly what the difficulty is” (FRUS VI 379).[11]

Amidst the strife, Argentina’s ambassador in Havana offered to facilitate discussions in January of 1960. Neither side expressed interest (Schlesinger 1965, p. 222). Instead, with Bonsal’s counsel, Eisenhower made a lengthy statement on 26 January laying out five basic principles for a functional relationship. He opened by noting he was “deeply perplexed by

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[10]Beyond the issues already noted, trade dwindled between the states. Invoking the Export Control Act in October of 1960, US exports to Cuba had declined from over $500 million per year under Batista to approximately $115 million a year (FRUS VI 590).

[11]Earlier contact between the parties established a dialogue. Within weeks of taking Havana, Castro representatives reached out to Treasury Secretary Anderson, floating the possibility of US aid in the form of a stabilization fund. The NSC took up the idea of an aid package, in conjunction with IMF loans and strictures (FRUS VI 250). However, this initial overture for direct negotiations dissipated as Cuban representatives, under Castro’s instructions and much to the surprise of US officials, did not broach the topic during his April visit to the US (Schlesinger 1965, p. 221). A second diplomatic effort came when Pazos from the National Bank sought a higher sugar quota, which Castro himself brought up in the unusual fashion of a direct telegram to the Secretary of Agriculture. Mann rejected the idea of even locking in the status quo quota levels, let alone raising them, at a time when US investments were threatened on the island (FRUS VI 283, 313, 316).
the steady deterioration” before enumerating the five principles: (1) US non-intervention in Cuba, (2) increased US efforts to prevent illegal acts against Cuba emanating from Florida, (3) Cuban respect for the US in its statements which had become increasingly hostile and accusatory, (4) due regard for compensation, and (5) recognition that US economic interests had been and could be beneficial to Cuban development (Bonsal 1971).

The overture was for naught. Cuba’s reciprocating outreach came from Roa in February, offering to restart negotiations with the pre-condition that there could be no Congressional action that would “cause harm to the Cuban economy or people” (FRUS VI 467). This was a non-starter given the separation of powers, which Roa was surely fully aware of. Though increasingly hopeless, Bonsal noted “there was on both sides a desire to maintain a negotiating stance. The United States had been sincerely ready to seek accommodation” but that the “gap in basic concepts between the two governments was too great” (Bonsal 1971, p. 127).

Lingering optimism for negotiations receded with the 4 March explosion of La Coubre, a ship in the Havana harbor carrying Belgian arms to the Castro regime. Immediate accusations against the US were the last straw for Eisenhower, who two weeks later approved the CIA plan for covert operations to remove Castro from power. Both the US embassy team and the planning board of the NSC had concluded that there “was no clear prospect for satisfactory relations with the Cuban Government as now constituted” (FRUS VI 472).

Even still, both Roa and Bonsal pushed for new discussions, the former again with a litany of pre-conditions attached (Bonsal 1971, p. 138). The latter, while acknowledging “The situation here is of course pretty hopeless,” sought a last attempt that would tie the 1961 sugar quota level to compensation to US investors. Bonsal pursued this line of reasoning with his superiors in Washington throughout the summer of 1960. However, Mann killed the idea, telling Bonsal in September: “I don’t believe we really have any chance of working out with the Castro regime a satisfactory solution of the problem of expropriated properties. Our best bet is to wait for a successor regime” (FRUS VI 582). A fortnight later, Secretary Herter encouraged the President to recall Bonsal as the State Department was already
working to foment domestic opposition to Castro (FRUS VI 592, Morley 85).

The states cut formal relations in the first days of 1961. Cuba demanded that the US reduce its Havana embassy staff to 11 individuals. Eisenhower promptly severed diplomatic relations (Morley 1987, p. 125) and reportedly told the incoming Secretary of Defense McNamara that the US cannot allow the Castro government to exist (FRUS X 22).

Surprisingly, Krushchev floated the possibility of a new US-Cuban dialogue only five days before the Brigade landed in Cuba (FRUS X 77). His entreaties to the US ambassador in Moscow were followed by efforts from the Soviet ambassador in Washington to enlist Arthur Schlesinger’s support for a new dialogue. However, the US had abandoned diplomatic efforts as the Brigade had already departed its training base in the hills of Guatemala.

4.3 Overprecision at CIA and the Oval Office

Having established the content of what was bargained over, I now turn to the factors or variables that drove the bargaining process. As the theory chapter highlighted, what states believe they can achieve through force shapes the bargaining terms they will accept. Strong and highly resolved states expect to achieve favorable outcomes through the use of force which drives them to expect better outcomes from bargaining. Expected military outcomes shape the bargaining range.

I argue that political attributes of an opponent are essential to estimating military outcomes, but are often given scant attention and are estimated with excess certainty, or overprecision, when diplomats have little input during assessment processes. This section establishes that these conditions prevailed in the Bay of Pigs case. Political attributes of Cuba shaped US estimates of what could be secured through force. Though estimates of Cuba’s military strength were surely pivotal, estimates of the political landscape were of equal, if not greater, importance. CIA drove the estimates for the likelihood of uprisings. Based on past success in Guatemala and human intelligence provided by agents in touch with rebel forces across Cuba, senior CIA officials concluded that popular uprisings and military defections
were almost certain to occur.

However, alternative estimates, particularly from the State Department, invoked greater uncertainty. Officials from the Departments of State and Defense, as well as staff on the intelligence side of CIA, believed that the rapid consolidation of the Castro regime and its increasing resemblance to a Communist police state merited uncertainty on the likelihood of uprisings. Examining these uncertain estimates reveals that criticism of CIA (Dulles and Bissell, in particular) estimates is not a matter of hindsight. Readily available information from sources that are typically consulted suggested that the prevailing estimate shaping presidential decisions was overprecise.

Beyond noting the greater uncertainty that others expressed, I further establish that the Dulles/Bissell estimate was overprecise. Studying the realized extent of uprisings—there were essentially none—demonstrates that the prevailing estimate understated the range of possible outcomes. The section concludes by connecting the overprecise estimates about popular uprisings to the US' harsh bargaining demands.

4.3.1 Importance of Political Attributes

Military attributes, such as the equipment, size, and training of enemy forces, inform expected outcomes from using force. However, they are not all that matters. An adversary’s political elements similarly affect expected conflict outcomes. For US decision makers studying Cuba before the Bay of Pigs, these political elements or variables took a number of forms. First and foremost was the likelihood and extent of popular uprisings against Castro. CIA’s assault plan envisioned that airstrikes and the amphibious landing would spark a series of uprisings. Castro’s 200,000 strong militia would necessarily be dispersed to address the uprisings, limiting the force he could bring to bear against the Brigade which would establish a lodgment along the coast.

Defections by those in the militia as well as the professional military would improve the military balance in favor of the Brigade. These defections would undermine the resolve of Castro’s forces, further shifting military prospects in the US favor. Beyond widespread
uprisings and defections, CIA anticipated that the local population and perhaps nearby guerrilla forces would join with and supplement the Brigade, at least in early versions of the assault plan (detailed below).

Bissell stressed the importance of uprisings in a briefing paper prepared for Kennedy two months before D-Day. A shock was needed to spark uprisings and defections.

Small-scale infiltrations would not produce a psychological effect sufficient to precipitate general uprisings and widespread revolt among disaffected elements of Castro’s armed forces. These conditions must be produced before the Castro Government can be overthrown by any means short of overt intervention by United States armed forces. As long as the armed forces respond to Castro’s orders, he can maintain himself in power indefinitely. The history of all police-type states bears out this conclusion (FRUS X 46).

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recognized the importance of these political attributes. In their February 1961 evaluation of the Trinidad Plan, which was ultimately scrapped in favor of the Zapata plan (detailed below), the JCS noted that “Since the success of this operation is dependent on the degree of local Cuban support, this factor should be a matter of continuous evaluation until a decision to execute the operation is made. . . . It is obvious that ultimate success will depend upon political factors; i.e., a sizable popular uprising or substantial follow-on forces” (FRUS X 35). JCS reconfirmed this view a month later: “Ultimate success will depend on the extent to which the initial assault serves as as catalyst for further action on the part of anti-Castro elements throughout Cuba” (FRUS X 56).

The Joint Chiefs’ conclusion, instilled by CIA’s own vision of how the assault would unfold, was not lost on other officials. During a mid-March White House meeting with Kennedy, “it was emphasized that the plan was dependent on a general uprising in Cuba and that the entire operation would fail without such an uprising” (FRUS X 66). Military and militia defections were similarly important to the operation’s prospects. General Gray felt that “200,000 militia each with a submachine gun is, in itself, a pretty strong force if they do nothing more than stand and pull the triggers” (FRUS X 21).

During the Taylor Commission’s post-mortem analysis on the failed operation, a parade of senior officials similarly stressed the importance of popular uprisings for shaping expected
military outcomes.

McGeorge Bundy: “Success in the operation was always understood to be dependent upon an internal Cuban reaction” (Aguilar 1981, p. 177)

Robert Kennedy: “uprisings were an essential part of the JCS evaluation” (Aguilar 1981, p. 86)

General Gray: “key to the plan was popular uprisings all over the island which would pin down the militia in other areas” (Aguilar 1981, p. 83)

General White: “I felt all along the the success or failure of this operation depended almost entirely upon the reaction of the Cuban people.” (Aguilar 1981, p. 255)

In sum, estimates of Cuba’s political attributes drove assessments of expected outcomes to using force which, in turn, affected US conceptions of the bargaining range.

4.3.2 CIA’s High-Certainty Estimate of Popular Uprisings

What was the prevailing estimate about the likelihood and scale of these popular uprisings? How certain was the estimate? Some background context is needed before turning to the estimates for Cuba. The successful CIA-sponsored 1954 intervention and overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala served as a analogical reference point throughout the operational planning process for the Bay of Pigs. The Cuba plan reprised many elements from Guatemala. Both relied on radio propaganda from a CIA-led station on Swan Island off the coast of Guatemala. As with Cuba, the Guatemalan operation presumed that the entrance of the US-selected successor to Arbenz (Casillo Armas) and his supporters from neighboring Honduras would “touch off a general uprising against the Guatemalan regime” (Higgins 1987, p. 24-34).[12]

Having successfully induced high level defections in Guatemala, CIA officials believed it was a viable strategy for Cuba. Moreover, many of the same individuals involved with planning the Guatemalan operation were instrumental in the Cuban planning. Richard Bissell, Tracy Barnes, and Jacob Esterline were all involved in Guatemala, as was the head

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[12] In reality, it took limited US airstrikes and confusion from the radio propaganda to spark high level military officials to defect and turn on Arbenz, who they feared would begin arming local militias that could threaten the military’s purview.
of propaganda efforts David Phillips (Wyden 1979, p. 20). This is not to say they did not undertake a new analysis to gauge the likelihood and extent of uprisings and defections in Cuba, but it does provide a baseline frame of reference that influenced the assessors’ priors.

Turning to Cuba, how did CIA assess the prospects for anti-Castro activities? US officials recognized that Castro enjoyed immense popularity upon assuming power (FRUS VI 266). Two competing trends over the next two years shaped his subsequent hold on power. On the one hand, Castro’s increasingly leftist policies and authoritarian tendencies left many of his original supporters disaffected. These included middle class and urban elites, university students, and the Catholic Church (FRUS VI 408, 456). On the other hand, Castro’s regime extended the police and oversight apparatuses of the state, clamping down on dissent, arresting dissidents, asserting control over Cuban media sources, and bringing asymmetric forces to bear against the limited guerrilla forces persisting in the Escambray mountains and elsewhere (FRUS VI 583, 596).

CIA’s original operational plan, which Eisenhower approved in March 1960, called for the development and support of a domestic opposition to Castro. In support of this policy, Dulles noted that the “opposition was becoming more outspoken,” but that it lacked supplies and competent leadership (FRUS VI 492, 495). Originally, the plan was to airdrop supplies to anti-Castro guerrillas and to quietly infiltrate paramilitary forces that benefitted from US training (FRUS VI 596). The plan’s flaws were evident by November. Incompetence plagued the supply airdrops with missed drop zones and the provided irrelevant supplies. Eisenhower recognized the difficulties and authorized a shift in planning away from infiltration toward a full assault that might incite widespread insurrections (Jones 2008, p. 34).\(^1\)

With a frontal assault replacing infiltration, a rallying shock and follow-on popular uprisings became pivotal to the operation’s military prospects. To assess the prospects for such uprisings, CIA relied upon human intelligence from dissidents within Cuba. Analysts estimated, based on this human intelligence, that a large opposition lay in waiting. In three

\(^{13}\)Famously, this shift in priorities lead to a change in the Brigade’s training regimen away from guerrilla operations.
March 1961 reports, CIA officials wrote, “Many people in Camaguey believe that the Castro regime is tottering and that the situation can at any moment degenerate into bloody anarchy . . . The opposition forces in the Escambray are enjoying great popularity,” that “Opposition to the Castro regime is becoming more open,” and that “The Castro regime is steadily losing popularity . . . It is generally believed that the Cuban army has been successfully penetrated by opposition groups and that it will not fight in the event of a showdown.” The group of US-selected exiles who would constitute the replacement government—the Frente Revolucionario Democratico (FRD)—similarly predicted large latent support for efforts to topple Castro (Wyden 1979, p. 98-99,140,167-169).

During the Taylor Commission hearings, CIA officials (names redacted) reported that they had “agents up and down the length of Cuba . . . who gave us the picture of large numbers of people begging for arms in order to fight Castro” (Aguilar 1981, p. 72). Another reported a large backlog of “requests from our agents for supplies, arms, and ammunition for 8,000. These people were crying for supplies” (Aguilar 1981, p. 142). Similarly, in their rebuttal to the scathing criticisms from CIA Inspector General Kirkpatrick (1962), Bissell and Barnes report that “Many requests for aid during the period 22 March to 17 April were received through Agency communication channels” (Bissell 1962, V, p. 10).

Based on these reports, senior CIA officials expressed near certainty that it was a matter of when, not if, popular uprisings would emerge. Dulles reported a sharp increase in popular discontent and opposition to Castro (Higgins 1987, p. 82). Bissell stated in a January briefing memo for Kennedy that the “consolidation of the beachhead would elicit widespread rebellious activities and great disorganization,” though he did acknowledge that this might not in itself quickly force Castro from power (FRUS X 27).

Bissell voiced his near certainty about uprisings, while noting two weeks later that there was little hope of Castro falling without outside provocation as the regime solidified “its control over all the major institutions of society and [worked] to employ them on the Communist pattern as instruments of repression” (FRUS X 46). He reconciled the tensions between these two estimates—that Castro was consolidating control and yet popular up-
risings would arise in concert with the Brigade’s landing—by stressing the importance of a shock or rally point. CIA designed the Trinidad Plan to be visible enough to precipitate these events. However, the President deemed the shock of a Trinidad landing too loud and too likely to show the US hand in the operation (FRUS X 59). When asked for a quieter alternative, CIA planners came back with the Zapata, or Bay of Pigs, alternative four days later. After initial pushback suggesting the Zapata landing was still too loud, Bissell assuaged remaining concerns by moving to a night landing, with all landing craft gone by daylight.

There was an obvious tension between hiding the US hand and the apparent need for a spectacular landing to spark popular uprisings. This tension did not escape Bissell, who recognized that uprisings from Zapata would materialize more slowly. Moreover, the swamps around the Bay of Pigs were sparsely populated which limited chances of locals joining the landing Brigade (Higgins 1987, p. 98). Despite privately believing the Zapata Plan was less likely to spark revolts, Bissell and Dulles continued to stress the likelihood of uprisings. During an early April meeting, Kennedy pushed on the estimative certainty around the uprisings. Both senior CIA officials stressed that “from 2,500 to 3,000 persons supported by 20,000 sympathizers were actively engaged in the resistance in Cuba, and that some 25% of the Cuban populace would actively support a well-organized, well-armed force” (Aguilar 1981, p. 19-20, Wyden 1979, p. 139).

Is it contradictory to my hypotheses, or at least substantively surprising, that CIA would fail to recognize the importance of and uncertainty attendant to estimates of an adversary’s political attributes? The theory stipulates overprecision is likely when officials ignore political factors or downplay the uncertainty over them. For empirical testing I stipulate this is least likely when diplomats are involved but perhaps CIA is also well-suited for bringing these political considerations to the forefront. In many cases it does, however its institutional mandate is sufficiently broad that its other imperatives—e.g., conducting covert action—may trump its concern with political attributes. Moreover, its institutional emphasis on human intelligence can, though it need not, limit the informational sources
its leaders call upon when advising the executive. CIA’s broad remit and emphasis on a particular source of information leave it susceptible to understating the import of and uncertainty around an adversary’s political characteristics.

CIA officials who developed the assault plan consistently assessed that popular uprisings were likely based on reports coming from Agency sources inside Cuba. Bissell occasionally discussed contingency planning should uprisings fail to emerge. However, these discussions were abbreviated and the possibility was downplayed, particularly when Kennedy was present (Jones 2008, p. 58-59). Bissell and Dulles did not invoke uncertainty or provide a clear sense of the probability of alternative outcomes unfolding. An absence of uncertainty over non-determinative events is tantamount to overprecision. 

4.3.3 Centrality of CIA Estimates

To state the obvious, President Kennedy authorized the Bay of Pigs operation, not the CIA. A highly certain estimate is only meaningful insofar as it is the assessment that decision makers adopt. If Kennedy ignored Dulles and Bissell, their certainty would be relatively harmless. Unfortunately, their views were determinative of Kennedy’s aggregated beliefs.

Two members of the JCS affirm the contention. When pushed during the Taylor hearings on who supplied information about the likelihood of uprisings, Marine Commandant Shoup replied, ‘I suppose it was CIA. Well, it’s obvious we wouldn’t be taking 30,000 additional rifles if we didn’t think there was going to be somebody to use them. I don’t think any

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A point of clarification bears mentioning. The theory chapter stipulates that the relevant form of uncertainty is uncertainty over the value of the parameters that shape expected conflict outcomes—such as the probability of a US, or Brigade, victory. This is distinct from the value of this probability itself. That is, a 30% probability of victory entails stochastic uncertainty—the US could win or lose depending on essentially random factors—but this is distinct from the uncertainty over the actual value of the parameter which dictates the range of acceptable bargains. Famously, the JCS report on the Trinidad Plan concluded that there was a “fair chance of ultimate success,” which it did not go on to define with any specificity (FRUS X 35). Multiple generals would later state that “fair” indicated 30-35% to them (Wyden 1979 p. 198, Higgins 1987 p. 83), while others such as Pentagon official Nitze, Admiral Burke, and Bissell himself interpreted it more favorably (Higgins 1987 p. 108, 112). Regardless of interpretation, recognition that the Brigade’s victory was uncertain is not equivalent to having uncertainty in the estimates over the parameters themselves. Put differently, Bissell acknowledging the possibility of failure (which goes into calculating the expected conflict outcome) is meaningfully distinct from his recognizing the warranted uncertainty around Castro’s consolidation of power (which would produce uncertainty over the calculated expected conflict outcome).
A military man would ever think that this force [the Brigade] could overthrow Castro without support. They could never expect anything but annihilation” (Aguilar 1981, p. 253). Shoup raises a critical point in noting the additional supplies loaded aboard multiple mission vessels. If CIA’s estimate were discounted, it is difficult to explain why the Brigade came equipped with an additional 30,000 weapons. Facing questions about the JCS impression for uprisings, Chairman Lemnitzer responded, “We had no information. We went on CIA’s analysis and it was reported that there was a good prospect. I remember Dick Bissell, evaluating this for the President, indicated there was sabotage, bombings and there were also various groups that were asking or begging for arms and so forth” (Aguilar 1981, p. 334). The President had similar takeaways from CIA briefings in the NSC. He anticipated quick uprisings throughout the island (Wyden 1979, p. 309-310).

Officials adopted CIA assessments for multiple reasons. As a matter of procedure, nearly every NSC meeting concerning Cuba opened with a briefing from either Dulles or Bissell. Floor time in such a prominent policy-setting venue shaped the discussion that followed. Senior officials from other branches, including Secretary of State Rusk, addressed questions to these CIA officials, viewing them as the experts on the matter (for reasons addressed in a subsequent section).

Moreover, Bissell and Dulles were held in high esteem given their experience and past successes. The two had crafted the incredible success in Guatemala. Bissell was praised for his earlier roles in insuring the Marshall Plan’s success and the rapid development of the U-2 spy plane. According to Kennedy adviser Roswell Gilpatric, Dulles and Bissell bestowed prestige on the operation which wowed the less experienced members of the new administration. Rusk, hardly a newcomer to policy deliberations, described Bissell as a “persuasive briefer.” As a new executive, Kennedy was similarly receptive to CIA’s seeming command of the pertinent facts. Schlesinger reports that in the operation’s wake, Kennedy told him “If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals” (Wyden 1979, p. 17,315,317).
4.3.4 Diplomats (and Others) were More Uncertain

Kennedy asked “How could I have been so stupid?” in the aftermath of the failed operation (Wyden 1979, p. 310). Hindsight reveals the many flaws in the planning and assessments preceding the Bay of Pigs mission. But the theory of overprecision and bargaining failure predicts that estimative errors are not only evident the day after. Rather, the theory predicts that some analysts and advisors, with access to different information, had greater uncertainty over salient variables. This was the case before the Bay of Pigs. Estimates from the State Department, Pentagon and JCS, allies, academics, and even many within CIA expressed a great deal of uncertainty. Unfortunately, for reasons discussed later, these estimates were marginalized and never gained purchase with the President.

As with CIA analysis, estimates from others frequently focused on the competing dynamics of growing discontent within Cuba and the increasingly powerful apparatuses of the state to control the population. How individuals adjudicated between these divergent forces often shaped their (un)certainty over the likelihood and extent of popular uprisings.

Diplomats are at the forefront of the theoretical contentions. I predict they are likely to incorporate information about an adversary’s political characteristics into their estimates, which produces greater uncertainty. Views from State Department officials conform with this expectation. State’s intelligence bureau, INR, recognized in fall 1960 that Castro’s creation of a “people’s militia” to assume much of the role of the Cuban military would effectively extend his control. Though the analysts noted that internal resistance rose sharply in the preceding half-year, the growing ability of the state to project power and police the population harmed the prospects for domestic insurrection (FRUS VI 600). The Policy Planning Staff of the State Department recognized the uncertainty created by these dueling trends, asking “If the curve of resistance within Cuba falls as opposition elements leave and Castro’s vise tightens, how does an opposition register or return?” (FRUS VI 605). Senior officials expressed similar doubts about uprisings. In a prescient memo to Rusk, Mann estimated “It is unlikely that a popular uprising would promptly take place in Cuba of a
scale and kind which would make it impossible for the Castro regime to oppose the brigade with superior numbers of well armed troops” (FRUS X 45). Rusk, at least in his memoir, indicated that “having never seen actual evidence that Cuba was ripe for another revolution, I doubted that an uprising would spring up in support of this operation” (Rusk 1990, p. 209).

Officials from the State Department granted that uprisings were possible. That is, their estimates do not inherently imply that the prevailing CIA assessment was simply too optimistic. The State estimates call for greater uncertainty, not necessarily pessimism. Charge d’affaires Braddock, during the final month before the embassy closed, reported rapid drops in Castro’s popularity offset by the “strengthening of his [Castro’s] military and paramilitary organizations.” One thousand guerrillas were fighting in the Escambrays but the “Cuban government seems very serious about routing them out and unfortunately it probably has the capacity to do so” (FRUS VI 617, 625).

State Department officials, as predicted, consistently noted countervailing trends and expressed greater uncertainty about the prospect for popular uprisings. Unfortunately, additional estimates from INR and embassy officials are unavailable as the former was not permitted to study the operation (discussed below) and the latter lost its ability to collect local information with the severing of diplomatic relations.

Diplomats were not alone in casting doubt on the prevailing CIA assessment. Edward Lansdale from the Pentagon was “extremely doubtful” about uprisings, pressing “What is the political base for what you’re going to do? How popular is it going to be?” (Wyden 1979, p. 72). Weeks later, Lansdale again raised questions by noting the growing capacity of the Castro regime to police the populace (FRUS VI 607). A DoD analysis from January 1961 concluded that “Massive internal popular support by the Cuban people of action to overthrow the Castro Government cannot be assured” (FRUS X 19).

Officials from the JCS were similarly uncertain about the political conditions within Cuba. General David Gray, a liaison between the Chiefs and other planners for the operation said he lacked the information needed to judge how rapidly uprisings would materialize (Wyden 1979, p. 89). In their February appraisal of the Trinidad Plan, the JCS listed their
“unknown factors.” Number one was “degree of popular support” (FRUS X 35). Their review of the Zapata Plan similarly deemed the friendliness of the population abutting the landing site an “unknown” (FRUS X 62). As with the State Department appraisals, the Defense Department officials did not preclude possible uprisings, but they noted the uncertainty around the possibility.

White House officials also questioned the CIA’s estimative certainty. Dick Goodwin pressed Bissell, “Why do you think the Cubans will rise up?” (Wyden 1979, p. 142). Ten days before the airstrikes, Schlesinger wrote to the President:

> since the Castro regime is presumably too strong to be toppled by a single landing, the operation will turn into a protracted civil conflict . . . if the Landing fails to trigger uprisings behind the lines and defections in the Militia (and the evidence that it would do so is inconclusive) the logic of the situation could well lead us, step by step, to the point where the last step would be to dispatch the Marines [emphasis added] (Higgins 1987, p. 114-115).

Schlesinger’s doubts were only strengthened by conversations with reporters who had recently visited Cuba and came away impressed by the intense support Castro enjoyed and likely antipathy that would attend US intervention (Schlesinger 1965, p. 248). Harvard professors John Plank and Bill Barnes both suspected that the Cuban population would be lukewarm toward exiled leaders returning (Wyden 1979, p. 123-125). British estimates, which they shared with CIA, concluded that less certainty was warranted as the “Cuban people were still predominately behind Castro and there was no likelihood at this point of mass defections or insurrections” (Schlesinger 1965, p. 291).

Many within CIA itself viewed the prospects for uprisings with greater skepticism. A June 1960 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded that Castro’s opposition remained splintered and leaderless (FRUS VI 531). A December NIE called attention to the dynamic noted by many others: “Any further erosion of Castro’s base of popular support is likely to be offset by the growing effectiveness of the state’s instrumentalities of control” (FRUS VI 620). Sherman Kent, often credited as the father of modern intelligence analysis, captured this dynamic in a January 1961 report: “While Castro will probably continue to lose popular
support, this loss is likely to be more than counter-balanced by the regime’s effective controls over daily life in Cuba and by the increasing effectiveness of its security forces for maintaining control” (Wyden 1979, p. 93).

Does the expressed uncertainty by officials from multiple bureaucracies, not only the State Department, undermine my theoretical contentions about the important role diplomats played? The answer is not really. Recall, the theory is fundamentally concerned with overprecision in estimates of an adversary’s political attributes. Diplomats, for the purpose of the theory and quantitative tests, serve as a reliable proxy for officials who are likely to recognize the uncertainty surrounding these political characteristics. That others may do so as well in some observations, such as the Bay of Pigs, does not challenge the theory. If anything it highlights that the proxy used for the quantitative tests is imperfect, but imperfect in a way that would only mute the findings as others besides State officials could recognize the uncertainty present, which the quantitative tests would not capture.

Suggesting that greater uncertainty was warranted than that expressed by Dulles and Bissell is not simply a matter of hindsight. Analysts and senior officials from numerous national security bureaucracies, most prominently the State Department, expressed doubts about the prospects for popular uprisings and mass defections. They did not preclude the possibility of such insurrections, but expressed greater doubt about their manifestation.

4.3.5 Establishing Overprecision: Ex Ante and Ex Post

The prior section established that many estimates conveyed greater uncertainty than the one CIA officials put forth, which the President and close advisers adopted. This suggests that information was available before the operation indicating that greater uncertainty was warranted. The operation’s failure further revealed the inadequacy of the predominant CIA estimate. Nothing akin to the predicted popular uprisings materialized, Castro had the state capacity to arrest as many as 200,000 potential dissidents in the days prior to D-Day, military defections were minimal, and the realized outcome was far worse than the predicted worst-case scenario. Senior Kennedy officials capture the post-mortem sentiments. Sorensen
writes the CIA’s “enthusiasm caused it to reject the clear evidence of Castro’s political and military strength which was available from British and State Department intelligence and even from newspaper stories” (Sorensen 1965, p. 305). Schlesinger concluded:

For the reality was that Fidel Castro turned out to be a far more formidable foe and in command of a far better organized regime than anyone had supposed. ...His police eliminated any chance of sabotage or rebellion behind the lines. His soldiers stayed loyal and fought hard (Schlesinger 1965, p. 293).

Overprecision in the bargaining context developed in the theory chapter implies that assessments ignore worst-case scenarios (and best-case scenarios). An overprecise estimate attaches little (or no) weight to an adversary being the toughest type that available information suggests it might be. Thus, if the realized outcome of an event is even worse than the envisioned worst-case scenario, this is an indication of overprecision.  

What was the worst-case scenario for Kennedy administration officials? Referring to the Trinidad Plan, NSA Bundy conveyed to the President that in dire circumstances the Brigade could escape into the Escambray mountains and join the guerrilla forces already there. Bissell gave credence to the idea, arguing that such a force could be sustained on a long-term basis and “would not be (and need not appear as) a serious defeat” (FRUS X 39, 46).

Bissell and other CIA officials recognized that the shift to Zapata undermined the hopes for a guerrilla back-up plan. Beyond having quit training for guerrilla missions six months earlier, the Brigade was now landing 80 miles from the Escambrays with an impenetrable swamp between them. More germane to my emphasis on the political conditions in Cuba, the extant guerrillas were under heavy stress as there was insufficient popular support to protect, feed, and assist them. However, the impossibility of the guerrilla fail-safe was not sufficiently conveyed to Kennedy or to his senior civilian and military advisors. On D+1, Admiral Burke inquired “Can anti-Castro forces go into the bush as guerrillas?” apparently unaware of the implications of the switch to Zapata (FRUS X 124). Chairman Lemnitzer

15In bargaining models where war is a winner-take-all event, the worst-case is clearly defined: unconditional defeat. However, we might relax this conception of war and circumscribe its outcomes to a more narrow range while retaining all of the logic underpinning the theory. In this sense, which I adopt here, worst-case scenarios are not inherently defined by the assumptions of the model but rather by the players’ estimates.
similarly asked about the possibility (Jones 2008, p. 122). Most importantly, the President authorized the operation believing the guerrilla option was still feasible. He “had given his approval with the understanding that there were only two possible outcomes—a national revolt or a flight to the hills” (Sorensen 1965, p. 303). Reality proved more dire than even the most pessimistic assessments. Defections were limited, uprisings were non-existent, and the Brigade was routed—of its 1,511 men, 114 died and 1,189 were captured (Wyden 1979, p. 303, Jones 2008, p. 96).

The realized conditions at the landing site and across Cuba were worse than expected. On D+1, Bundy reported to the President that “The Cuban armed forces are stronger, the popular response is weaker, and our tactical position is feebler than we had hoped” (FRUS X 119). Bissell recognized the “underestimation” of Castro’s organizational capacity and resolve to fight (Aguilar 1981, p. 146). Perhaps most telling was Castro’s capability to arrest between 100,000 and 200,000 possible dissidents between the D-2 airstrikes and the landing assault (Freedman 2000, p. 145, Rusk 1990, p. 208, Schlesinger 1965, p. 274, Johnson 1964, p. 121). The airstrikes alerted Castro who quickly dispatched his militia and increasingly powerful tools of power to prevent uprisings from materializing. Within the mass arrests, “virtually every CIA asset on the island was caught up” (Powers 1979, p. 111). The underground’s leader was executed on D-Day. One CIA asset infiltrated into Oriente Province, wired back to his handlers, “Impossible to rise. Most patriots in jail. Thanks for your damned invitation” (Wyden 1979, p. 246). Bissell, Dulles, and others failed to anticipate Castro’s reaction to the pre-landing airstrikes. Moreover, they underestimated his ability to clamp down on possible insurrectionists. To Sorensen, Castro’s “police state measures . . . proved far stronger than the operation’s planners had claimed” (Sorensen 1965, p. 303).

Predictions for extensive military defections also proved false. Che, who was in Guatemala when Arbenz lost power, was keen to purge the senior military ranks of potentially disloyal followers (Freedman 2000, p. 138). Consequently, high level defections were non-existent. Support at the landing site itself was limited due to its sparse population. Jacob Esterline,
a CIA overseer of the operation recalled that no one was there “except alligators and ducks” (Jones [2008] p. 84). To be fair, the Brigade did find limited support on the ground. Local volunteers assisted with carrying supplies, tending to the wounded, and providing food and water. One Brigade leader recalls finding sufficient supporters such that he provided a grand total of five uniforms. Another Brigade member recalls 50 men from a captured militia unit offering to join the Brigade (Johnson [1964] p. 115-137). These sympathetic few were insufficient for the task and far short of what CIA anticipated.

Operational failures on the military side—such as the cancellation of the D-Day airstrikes—obviously played a role in the mission’s failure. However, intelligence errors pertaining to Cuba’s political situation were crucial in both the decision to use force and the worse than expected outcome. Reflecting back on the failure, Lemnitzer stated “I don’t think we estimated the effectiveness of Castro’s control over the people” (Aguilar [1981] p. 334). Former Ambassador Bonsal stressed a similar point:

they [CIA] underestimated the fanaticism and the combative spirit of those who supported Castro unconditionally . . . The notion that his support would melt away and that tens of thousands of Cubans trained in the use of modern weapons would defect or refuse to fight if the few hundreds of Castro’s opponent, whom the United States had armed and trained, obtained an initial success was simply wishful thinking (Bonsal [1971] p. 184).

Prevailing estimates contained insufficient uncertainty, judged both by the information available at the time of the operation and ex post. As Adlai Stevenson had suggested of the young president, he was frequently “too certain of himself” (Wyden [1979] p. 155).

Two potential critiques merit attention. First, some could argue the estimative error was one of overoptimism, not overprecision. This argument would suggest the problem was not too much certainty but rather that the mean of the estimate was skewed toward

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16 Though not typically incorporated into bargaining models of war, state’s often suffer diplomatic costs to fighting. Using force can garner opprobrium from other states. Before the Bay of Pigs operation, Bissell estimated that the global reaction would be “minimal in the case of unobtrusive US support” (FRUS X 46). Schlesinger and multiple State Department officials predicted more substantial blowback, noting that even a “successful military result may be to a considerable degree nullified by seriously adverse results in the political, diplomatic, and economic areas” (FRUS X 86). Once again Bissell was proven overly certain as the UN atmosphere was deemed “highly dangerous” to the US interests following the operation (FRUS X 148).
a more favorable value. Establishing overoptimism is even more difficult than establishing overprecision. Even ex post, the realized outcome of limited defections, mass imprisonment, and no uprisings tells us little about the what the appropriate mean was for the estimate. The observed outcome could simply be a bad “draw” from the distribution of possible outcomes. Moreover, as noted in the prior section, State Department officials and others voicing greater uncertainty did not preclude the possibility of uprisings. Most of these officials believed they were possible and some even granted the possibility anti-Castro sentiments were more widespread than CIA suggested. For instance, Braddock in the Havana embassy writes, “The potential opposition to Castro is enormous . . . and takes in probably well over one-half of the population” (FRUS VI 616). The problem was the prevailing CIA estimate precluded a wider range of possible outcomes. Additionally, the mass military defections during the 1954 Guatemala operation demonstrate that CIA expectations were neither implausible nor maximally optimistic. Even more optimistic assessments calling for rapid high-level defections similar to those against Arbenz were conceivable but the CIA never made them. Consistent with overprecision, extreme outcomes, both favorable and unfavorable, received scant attention and weight in the CIA and President’s assessment. In aggregate, the problem with the dominant estimate is better described as one of excess certainty rather than excess optimism.

A second critique is that the CIA estimate was never actually tested—that is, that we cannot establish whether it was overprecise. In their rebuttal to Inspector General Kirkpatrick’s report (1962), Bissell and Barnes contend that their assessment for uprisings was “Not Tested” (Bissell 1962 V, p. 2). The argument goes as follows. CIA did not predict immediate uprisings. They predicted uprisings and defections provided the Brigade could gain a successful lodgment on the beach that lasted seven days (Higgins 1987 p. 72,103). Other CIA officials claimed the uprisings were only expected provided the Brigade advanced to Matanzas, some 75 miles away (Aguilar 1981 p. 142).

This effort to backtrack by the plan’s devisers fails on multiple counts. First, by their own admission they failed to make any of these conditional elements of their expectations
clear to the President and his closest White House advisors (Vandenbroucke 1984). Their more qualified description of their prediction is irrelevant if they did not share it with the President. Second, Castro’s ability and decision to arrest upwards of 200,000 potential dissidents likely makes the timing argument moot (Kirkpatrick 1962, p. 55-56). If the Brigade held out seven days, as Bissell claims his estimate required, it is difficult to envision uprisings given that hundreds of thousands of potential supporters were jailed. Third, Schlesinger unpacks Dulles’ revisionist account and exposes its inadequacy. Dulles stated “I know of no estimate that a spontaneous uprising of the unarmed population of Cuba would be touched by the landing.” To which Schlesinger replies:

This statement plainly reflected the CIA notion the the invasion would win by attrition rather than by rebellion. It also, strictly construed, was accurate enough in itself—if due attention is paid to such key words as ‘spontaneous,’ ‘unarmed’ and ‘landing.’ Obviously no one expected the invasion to galvanize the unarmed and unorganized into rising against Castro at the moment of disembarkation. But that invasion plan, as understood by the President and the Joint Chiefs, did assume that the successful occupation of an enlarged beachhead area would rather soon incite organized uprising by armed members of the Cuban resistance. Dulles and Bissell themselves reinforced this impression (Schlesinger 1965, p. 247).

By any reasonable standard, such as the one Schlesinger outlines, CIA’s prediction was put to the test and not borne out.

### 4.3.6 Overprecision Led to Bargaining Failure

The theoretical causal chain links overprecise estimates to onerous bargaining demands. Overprecision can lead states to assume more strident bargaining postures which can lead to conflict. Establishing this link in the chain is admittedly difficult in the Bay of Pigs case, as it likely is for any case. Bargaining is frequently implicit. Moreover, it is difficult to pin down precisely why states assume the bargaining postures they do. Ideally, I could demonstrate that overprecise estimates about the likelihood of popular uprisings and defections led the US to eliminate the sugar quota and demand that Castro purge Communists from the regime.

Unfortunately, the available evidence is merely suggestive and not definitive. Some argue
that the US took overly harsh positions against Castro. US demands for the British and other allies to halt arms shipments to Cuba, as well as the failure of US efforts to prevent hostile flights from departing Florida, are cited as harsh US positions. Ambassador Bonsal found US demands to be onerous. He believed that US measures pertaining to the sugar quota and ban on oil refining “went far beyond the retaliation warranted by the injuries American citizens and interests had up to that time suffered at Castro’s hands” (Welch 1985, p. 47,53).

Whether these high demands were fully attributable to overprecise estimates is debatable and ultimately the most glaring weakness of the case study. That said, the US did abide Communists coming to power in numerous regimes where the prospects of a US-led regime change were far worse—such as throughout Eastern Europe. Beliefs that regime change was feasible in Cuba, which rested on strong assumptions about the domestic political landscape, likely figured prominently in US intolerance of its increasingly Communist leanings.

### 4.4 Why Diplomats were Marginalized

Overprecision is most likely to occur when assessment processes marginalize diplomats who are tasked to develop expertise in an adversary’s political (and military) characteristics. Prior sections have established (1) the central role CIA estimates played in shaping Kennedy’s aggregate estimate and (2) that State Department officials, along with others, expressed greater uncertainty in their own estimates. This section has two objectives. First, it provides further evidence that State Department officials as well as those from outside the narrow team of CIA planners, were marginalized during the deliberation process. Second, it offers a variety of explanations for their marginalization. These reasons are multi-faceted, but they do not include a simple selection story whereby the President was predisposed to use force and consciously excluded potential doves from the process.

General Gray succinctly captured State Department’s marginalization: “What actually happened then was that CIA wrote up all the concepts, we in the JCS got them on an
evaluation basis, and the State Department got into the act very informally still later...In the Cuba operation CIA unilaterally developed the concepts. The other governmental agencies were essentially in a supporting role” (Aguilar 1981, p. 101, 151). In his memoir, Rusk voiced a similar critique that “the talents and resources of the government were not brought to bear” (Rusk 1990, p. 214). NSA Bundy notes that only the operation’s chief advocates provided intelligence to the President (Aguilar 1981, p. 177). According to the State Department Officer in Charge of Cuban Affairs there was “a divorce between the people who daily, or minute by minute, had access to information, to what was going on, and to people who were making plans and policy decisions” (Morley 1987, p. 43).

Beyond these high-level impressions, a number of instances make the point more tangible. The analytical process excluded State Department’s intelligence bureau (INR). Roger Hilsman, head of INR, recounts:

I was no expert on Cuba, but there were plenty of people in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research who were, and I asked the Secretary [Rusk] for permission to put them to work on the question. “I’m sorry,” he replied, “but I can’t let you. This is being too tightly held” (Hilsman 1967, p. 31).

Chester Bowles, who was aghast upon hearing of the plan, railed against it in a memo for Secretary Rusk. Rusk, however, returned the memo without having provided it to the President (FRUS X 75, Wyden 1979, p. 151, Rusk 1990, p. 209). On another occasion when Bowles sat in for Rusk during a Cuba meeting, he self-censored so as not to undermine his boss. Another State official, Leonard Meeker, sought a meeting with Bundy to voice his concerns, but found no audience. In an oft-recounted incident, Kennedy met his advisors at the State Department on 4 April. He went around the room, looking for yes/no answers about supporting the mission. Rusk, as well as Pentagon officials, resented being reduced to a one word response where his full views were unsolicited (Wyden 1979, p. 120, 148-150, 164).

Officials from State did admittedly have their views aired on occasion. They sat in on the Special Group from the early formation of the covert plans. Rusk, of course, participated in the NSC. But both venues were dominated by the plan’s architects, with State assuming
a limited advisory role, as Gray and Bundy recount.

Bissell’s tight circle also excluded CIA’s own intelligence experts. Decision makers did not seek input from Sherman Kent, head of CIA’s Board of Estimates. They similarly cut out Robert Amory, CIA Deputy Director, Intelligence. Perhaps even more bizarrely, Richard Helms, who had previously handled CIA’s covert operations in Cuba including efforts to undermine or assassinate Castro, played almost no role in planning the Bay of Pigs (Wyden 1979, p. 34, 310, Higgins 1987, p. 51).

Why did these officials, particularly those from the State Department, play such a limited role? A plausible concern is that Eisenhower and Kennedy held, for whatever reason, a strong predisposition to authorize the use of force and consequently diminished the input of potential opponents to the plan. However, there is little evidence of this. Kennedy in particular fought to be able to cancel the operation until the final days, evincing doubts about its authorization throughout the planning process.

Instead, a variety of factors specific to the State Department and factors specific to the Bay of Pigs decision-making process caused the marginalization of these officials. Two features of the State Department undermined its role. First, State was a comparatively risk-averse and slow moving institution, dating back to at least the Eisenhower years. President Eisenhower encouraged greater risk taking, indicating that he didn’t share State’s fear of “shooting from the hip” on occasion (Higgins 1987, p. 69). Kennedy was almost immediately disappointed with the glacial pace of action at the State Department, which he found prone to “excess delay” and likened to a “bowl of jelly.” Kennedy purportedly said, “By gosh, I don’t care what it is but if I need some material fast or an idea fast, CIA is the place I have to go. The State Department takes four or five days to answer a simple yes or no” (Wyden 1979, p. 95, Hilsman 1967, p. 34).

Hilsman criticized his former department for being “ill-prepared and occasionally befuddled.” Consequently, power in the Kennedy administration almost immediately flowed away

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17 See Higgins (1987) and Jones (2008) for full accounts of these efforts. Among the more preposterous plans was an effort to cause Castro’s beard to fall out, depriving him of his noteworthy visage, and the hiring of Mafia affiliates to kill Castro.
from the State Department. The President’s frustration led to the increasing use of task forces within State, some of which even had Pentagon officials appointed as chair. Bissell had his own history of frustration with State Department cautiousness, dating back to his work on the Marshall Plan (Wyden 1979, p. 13, Hilsman 1967, p. 27,30).

Second, Secretary Rusk’s non-assertive personality only magnified problems stemming from the underwhelming pace of State Department activities. Rusk was not one to sow dissent, being described as a “good errand boy” who sat quietly through the NSC, issuing only occasional “gentle warnings” (Higgins 1987, p. 170, Schlesinger 1965, p. 250). Hilsman asserts his former boss “failed in refusing to take a strong stand and in not insisting that experts who had a contribution to make should be allowed to make it.” Kennedy distilled the problem to a rhetorical question, “How do you fire a Secretary of State who never does anything, good or bad?” (Hilsman 1967, p. 34-35).

Three dynamics of the Bay of Pigs decision-making process exacerbated State’s marginalization. First, it was an ad hoc process. The mission’s covert character, which Kennedy insisted on retaining, meant that ordinary channels for analysis were off limits. INR could not weigh in and JCS evaluations were rushed and under-staffed (Higgins 1987, p. 76). Consider the Zapata Plan’s formation. After months of planning, Kennedy deemed the Trinidad Plan too overtly American on 11 March. Only four days later, Bissell came back to the President with three new proposals, including his preferred Zapata Plan. Kennedy was apparently impressed by the speed of this turnaround, rather than baffled by it and the implications for how well vetted the plan could be. Capturing this problem, the Taylor Report concludes:

The Executive Branch of the government was not organizationally prepared to cope with this kind of paramilitary operation. There was no single authority short of the President capable of coordinating the actions of CIA, State, Defense, and USIA. Top level direction was given through ad hoc meetings of senior officials without consideration of operational plans in writing and with no arrangement for recording conclusions and decisions reached (Aguilar 1981, p. 39).

Second, the secrecy of the operation served to marginalize many officials whose opinions
would typically be sought when contemplating using force. Officials involved in the process unanimously reached this conclusion.

Schlesinger: [No one] at State, in intelligence jargon, [was] ‘witting’ below Tom Mann, which meant that the men on the Cuban desk, who received the daily flow of information from the island, were not asked to comment on the feasibility of the venture. The ‘need-to-know’ standard—i.e., that no one should be told about the project unless it becomes operationally necessary—thus had the idiotic effect of excluding much of the expertise of the government at a time when every alert newspaperman knew something was afoot (Schlesinger 1965, p. 248).

Rusk: These covert matters are handled on such a restricted basis that the resources of the departments are not brought to bear (Aguilar 1981, p. 224).

Sorensen: secrecy permitted too little consideration of the plan and its merits by anyone other than its authors and advocates (Sorensen 1965, p. 304).

Bundy: The obsession with secrecy made for a less careful study of the plan than would have otherwise been made (Aguilar 1981, p. 181).

Who is granted access to the President affects the final estimates of an adversary’s characteristics. Secrecy circumscribed the group of individuals enjoying this access and consequently affected the information brought to bear.

Third, Kennedy deeply believed in himself. Presidents are responsible for collecting information from the optimal and requisite sources. While Dulles and Bissell surely stressed the need for secrecy, it was ultimately the President’s decision to curtail the scope of debate and perspectives offered. Schlesinger speculates: “One further factor no doubt influenced him: the enormous confidence in his own luck. Everything had broken right for him since 1956 … Everyone around him thought he had the Midas touch and could not lose” (Schlesinger 1965, p. 259). Kennedy’s assistant Dave Powers described the Bay of Pigs as “the first thing he ever lost” (Wyden 1979, p. 307). This raises a broader, speculative concern about overprecision’s sources. Those who reach such heights of power are likely those who have had a series of favorable “draws,” or outcomes, in what are actually random or stochastic processes. Put differently, they have been lucky. Such consistent luck could plausibly lead these officials to discount or ignore worst-case outcomes, generating overprecision.
4.5 Alternative Explanations

This section considers an array of alternative explanations for the authorization and failure of the mission. Was the assessment process plausibly consistent with a rationalist Bayesian framework? In short, no. Bayesian approaches are difficult to repudiate because individuals can reasonably vary in what they believe a piece evidence provides evidence of and in whether an information source is credible (Gerber and Green 1999; Bullock 2009). Neither of these considerations are tenable in the Bay of Pigs case. Assessors could not contort Castro’s growing capacity to police the populace into an indication of improving prospects for uprisings. Nor could they reasonably maintain that information from officials at State, Defense, JCS, and CIA was incredible. These are major organs of the US national security apparatus. Presidents do not typically discard their input. The estimative process preceding the Bay of Pigs was far more consistent with one characterized by errors, than one consistent with Bayesian expectations.

The account developed throughout this chapter, grants little agency to Cuba and Castro. It is admittedly one-sided. A counter-argument may suggest that the bargaining failure is better attributed to Cuban perceptions or actions. Two points matter for allocating responsibility to Cuba. First, was there two-sided asymmetric information, or uncertainty, in this dispute? If Castro was uncertain of US resolve and capabilities, then perhaps it was he who was demanding too much in bargaining which led to its failure. This was almost certainly not the case. US military superiority was beyond dispute should the US decide to bring its full force to bear. More importantly, the presence of a US-trained exile force and the resolve to actually use it were both well-known.

Despite US efforts, the training camps in Guatemala were an open secret. Media accounts picked up on the training sites as early as August 1960. Press stories, which varied in their accuracy on the details but all correctly noted US-led efforts in the hills of Guatemala, poured in over the next eight months. The Miami Herald, Guatemalan papers, The Nation, US News and World Report, New Republic, and New York Times all reported on these
efforts (Wyden 1979, p. 45-46,142-143,154).

Beyond having access to these media accounts, Castro had intelligence on the training camps. He received Soviet reports of so-called mercenaries training in US camps as early as summer 1960. By the fall, the Soviets and Castro were convinced an assault was imminent (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 57,67-69). Oddly enough, only a week later Eisenhower authorized changing the covert plan from an infiltration effort into the assault that Castro was predicting. Kennedy’s election and inauguration did not sway Castro's expectations. Castro knew that Kennedy had criticized Eisenhower for being soft on Cuba throughout the campaign (Wyden 1979, p. 103). Castro received Soviet reports of major movements at the Guatemalan camp on 12 April, the exact day the Brigade began its deployment toward the Bay of Pigs. He also received reports suggesting that the FRD in New York was expecting a 3,500 man force looking to establish a beachhead on Cuba (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 90). In sum, Castro had a great deal of generally accurate information about the extent of US resolve. Cuban uncertainty did not cause the bargaining failure.

In addition, the US knew that Cuba knew about the Brigade and its training. Press reports made this self-evident. In addition, the Special Group notes that it was known throughout Latin America, Senator Fulbright railed that it was an open secret, which Mann echoed, and the embassy further confirmed on 31 December 1960 when it noted that Cuban papers had a lead banner of “Yankee Invasion Imminent” (Wyden 1979, p. 69,122, FRUS VI 610, 629). Most tellingly, the JCS deemed it unlikely (15 to 85 against) that the Brigade would enjoy a surprise landing.

With a communist infiltrated town approximately one mile from the airfield, and a railroad on one side of the base and a highway on the other, and trees surrounding the entire base, all providing a constant opportunity for observation of activities at Retalhuleu, it is believed the Castro-communists will know when the main invasion force is airlifted from Retalhuleu to Puerto Cabezas over a period of three nights . . . Every effort has been made to keep this operation secret, but it is obvious that many people in the area are aware of what is going on. Although all troop movements are made at night, firing, explosions, aircraft orbiting over an objective area, parachute drops, and an abnormal number of unfamiliar aircraft in the area are a dead giveaway. A clandestine radio transmitter is known to be operating in the Retalhuleu area. The mayor of Retalhuleu is a
card-carrying communist and lives about a mile from the airstrip. Leaflets have been circulated in Guatemala City by the Communist Party giving many of the details of the activity. Although there are some inaccuracies in this material, much of it is accurate. It can therefore be presumed that Castro knows practically all about the operation except when, where, and in what strength (FRUS X 56).

Cuba had ample intelligence on US machinations and predicted the US was sufficiently resolved to use the Brigade.

Cuba could shape the bargaining dynamics through a second pathway: by signaling Castro’s control over the population. If the US estimate is overprecise which leads to onerous bargaining demands, Cuba would rationally like to introduce greater uncertainty into the US estimate and thus receive more favorable negotiating terms. However, the US is aware of this dynamic and is thus going to discount any cheap signals Cuba sent. What signals could Castro plausibly send and did he send them? Castro, perhaps, did try to signal his domestic popularity by regularly appearing in public at huge political rallies. Embassy officials often reported on these, indicating that the US at least perceived the signal. However, these rallies and the high levels of apparent popular support, were discounted for the reasons mentioned above. US officials knew Castro had incentives to show his popularity and hide his dissenters. Consequently, these signals did not introduce extra uncertainty into CIA’s, or really anyone’s, estimate of Cuban political conditions.

An alternative signal could have been mass arrests of potential dissidents before the D-2 airstrikes. Arresting 100,000-200,000 potential adversaries is a relatively costly and compelling display of state authority that may have swayed US perceptions of Castro’s consolidation of power. However, Castro, for whatever reason, did not pursue this course.18

Critics could further question whether it was overprecision regarding Cuba’s political attributes that led to bargaining failure on two grounds: (1) perhaps it was estimative error over Cuba’s military attributes and/or (2) bargaining failed due to commitment problems

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18In terms of military capabilities, Castro was reluctant to show the new equipment he received courtesy of the Soviets. Having learned from the 1954 Guatemala example, the Castro regime delayed revealing its associations with the Soviets so as to prevent the US from using the Caracas provision to rally OAS support for his ouster.
or issue indivisibility. I address each in turn. Estimates about Cuba’s military capabilities were not notably overprecise or optimistic. There were undoubtedly errors in these estimates, but much of the intelligence on Cuban military capabilities was quite accurate, or at least reflected the available information. It is revealing that Chairman Lemnitzer, when asked if intelligence problems led to the Bay of Pigs failure, named errant intelligence about the prospects for uprisings and Castro’s police measures. He did not invoke poor intelligence about Castro’s military assets and competence (Aguilar 1981, p. 334).

More specifically, assessments of Cuban capabilities were relatively accurate, proving optimistic on some accounts and pessimistic on others. A Pentagon study in January 1961 estimated the Cuban army at 32,000 men and the militia at 200,000-300,000 men. Both estimates, if anything, were likely high (FRUS X 19). Lemnitzer accurately assessed that there was neither evidence of jets in Cuba, nor any evidence pointing to missiles or nuclear weapons (FRUS X 24). Intra-operation assessments were reasonable as well, as officials estimated the damage done by the D-2 strikes against Castro’s air force (Wyden 1979, p. 193, Higgins 1987, p. 129). Officials did, however, underestimate the combat effectiveness of the army and militia. Both General Gray and Bissell discounted their capabilities, though they noted their large numbers relative to the Brigade’s size (FRUS X 38, 58).

Officials were also generally accurate about what needed to occur for the military plan to be viable. Most understood the importance of successful strikes that debilitated Castro’s air force, preventing it from harassing the beach landings. Colonel Hawkins said it “must be knocked out or neutralized before our amphibious shipping makes its final run into the beach. If this is not done, we will be courting disaster” (FRUS X 9). Bundy suggested this view was unanimous during a 15 March meeting (FRUS X 64). Rusk and Kennedy’s decision to cancel the second airstrikes on D-Day primarily stemmed from political concerns. Hiding the US hand in the operation took on growing importance as deniability for the D-2 strikes became implausible and global criticism mounted (Schlesinger 1965, p. 272). Cabell and Bissell plead to Rusk to reinstate the strikes, though they opted not to speak directly to Kennedy to voice the “disastrous” consequence of the cancellation (FRUS X 108). As
estimated, the viability of Cuba’s air force was critical to the operation.

Military estimates were admittedly off on two accounts. On the first, predictions of a smooth amphibious assault were ill-founded, judged both ex ante and ex post. Marine Commandant Shoup stated, “If this kind of an operation can be done with this kind of a force with this much training and knowledge about it, then we [the Marines] are wasting our time in our division, we ought to go on leave for three months out of four” (Aguilar 1981, p. 247). His concerns proved prescient, in part due to the failure to eliminate Castro’s Air Force. On the second, Castro’s army and militia proved more mobile and responsive than estimated. Communications equipment at the landing site, which CIA did not anticipate, facilitated a rapid, well-managed response by Castro’s forces. General Gray estimated it would take three to four days for a counter-attack to the Trinidad landing, and if anything the Zapata landing site was even more remote and inaccessible (FRUS X 38). This estimate was inaccurate. Bissell confessed as much, noting that Castro’s “organization ability” and “speed of movement” surpassed expectations. US estimates of Cuban military capabilities, though flawed, were far more accurate than the estimates of Cuban political characteristics. Throughout the planning process, officials recognized that uprisings were essential for operational success. And while Castro’s forces responded faster than anticipated, it must be noted that the Brigade fought well, inflicting heavy casualties on the rapidly arriving militia units (Johnson 1964).

Consider another alternative explanation. Did bargaining fail for another reason, rather than for the informational reasons I posit? Commitment problems and issue indivisibility are two alternative rationalist explanations for conflict (Fearon 1995). An issue indivisibility account of the Bay of Pigs would argue that Communist influence in the Castro regime was non-negotiable. Furthermore, it assumes that no side payments would be sufficient to compensate whichever side did not get its preferred degree of Communist infiltration. I give this argument little credence. US officials tolerated Communist regimes around the world when estimated conflict outcomes were less favorable. Cuba’s proximity might make Communism’s presence less tolerable, but it simultaneously makes expected conflict outcomes
more favorable to the US. Given more favorable expected conflict outcomes, US officials were less willing to abide an adverse peaceful settlement.

Commitment problems present a more viable alternative explanation. Sherman Kent’s famous March 1961 memo “Is Time on Our Side in Cuba?” concluded in the negative (Wyden 1979, p. 99). If Castro’s power was only growing, then the US could opt for a preventive attack now rather than suffer unfavorable bargaining outcomes in the future. Three considerations all pushed toward using force sooner rather than later. Most consistent with conventional commitment problem accounts, Castro was receiving Soviet arms at an alarming rate. By April these transfers were approximately half complete. Cuba had received 125 of 205 tanks and many small arms, but was still waiting on 128 howitzers (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, p. 92). Additionally, according to Bissell and Hawkins, Cuban pilots were receiving training in Czechoslovakia for use on jets that were forthcoming. Looming technical proficiency on an array of weapons systems led Bissell to conclude that “after some date probably no more than six months away it will become military infeasible to overthrow the Castro regime except through the commitment to combat of a sizable organized military force” (FRUS X 9, 46).

A second timing issue concerned the Brigade’s “disposal.” Growing pressure on the Guatemalan government made Ydigoras eager to have the Brigade out of his territory (FRUS X 9, Freedman 2000, p. 128, Higgins 1987, p. 90, Sorensen 1965, p. 296). Dulles invoked the “disposal” concern repeatedly from January through April (FRUS X 24, 63, Wyden 1979, p. 159). Disbanding the Brigade and releasing them into the public was deemed problematic. Brigade members would share their story, casting the US and Kennedy as unresolved. The Brigade’s behavior created a final timing issue. Members were increasingly restive after months of confinement. Hawkins reported threats to morale and of desertions. A January mutiny, protesting the arrival of Batistianos exacerbated the concerns (Sorensen 1965, p. 296, Schlesinger 1965, p. 236, FRUS X 9).

All of these factors plausibly contributed to the timing of the operation. However, a commitment problem account demands more. The shift in power (and costs related to
disposal) had to be of sufficient size to preclude a peaceful settlement. I will not attempt to ascribe actual values to the relevant parameters in the case, but none of these shifts were likely of sufficient magnitude. Schlesinger noted that the disposal issue could not be determinative given the high stakes of the dispute (Higgins 1987, p. 99). And though the prospects for unseating Castro were diminishing, the speed and magnitude of this shift were small. Howitzers, tanks, and jets were minimal challenges to the US military should the President opt to dedicate US resources and capabilities. Commitment problem dynamics were present, but were less telling in the bargaining failure than the informational problems I emphasize in this chapter.

Another counter-argument asks what role did divergent bureaucratic preferences play, if any? Consider a plausible account: CIA sought to further build its “brand” and garner additional resources and esteem by executing yet another bold covert operation and thus offered estimates that would encourage Kennedy to authorize the operation. This account is inline with Allison’s posited “pulling and hauling” and bureaucratic infighting. While possible, I refute this on multiple fronts. First, presidential censure incentivizes advisers to serve the president’s interests (and by extension the state’s interests) which guards against strategic misrepresentation of their views (Meirowitz 2006). Indeed, Dulles and Bissell were held accountable for their poor performance, each losing his job in the operation’s aftermath. Second, there was a notable dearth of jockeying from other agencies, which is difficult to explain if they recognized CIA maneuvering for greater clout. CIA stepped deep into DoD’s substantive purview, asserting control over a large-scale amphibious assault with preceding airstrikes. Yet McNamara and Lemnitzer’s complaints were limited to ones about time and resources for review rather than more serious accusations of bureaucratic encroachment. If Allison were right, DoD ought to be “pulling and hauling” as well. Alternatively, perhaps Dulles and Bissell deemed international Communism a greater threat than did their peers. Though virtually unfalsifiable, I am dubious this holds given who their peers were—Bundy, McNamara, Rusk, etc.—and the contemporaneous and subsequent policies those peers ad-

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19 Though see Schub (Forthcoming) on power asymmetry, shifting power, and commitment problems.
vocated and endorsed.

One theoretical expectation is contradicted by this case. I contend that overprecision persists throughout and across presidencies because it is difficult to learn from past errors. Individuals frequently do not believe they are overprecise, even when they have been overprecise in the past. However, contrary to my argument, Kennedy and his advisors insist they learned from the Bay of Pigs. “Once burned by the Bay of Pigs,” Hilsman contends that Kennedy sought out “relevant expertise,” not only the views of a policy’s advocates (Hilsman 1967, p. 575). Bundy insisted that Kennedy and the White House “get the flow of raw intelligence from State, Defense, and the CIA” so as to prevent excessive reliance on a single, potentially flawed, information source (Schlesinger 1965, p. 422). The President himself purportedly stated “Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did. Otherwise we’d be in Laos by now—and that would be a hundred times worse” (Sorensen 1965, p. 644).

I take such testimonials as sincere. That said, marginalization of viewpoints and estimative overprecision cannot be learned or legislated away. Hilsman argues there is only so much you can do as “there is no simple or easy solution. No constitutional amendment that will give this guarantee” (Hilsman 1967, p. 575). Kennedy, after all, did commit thousands of military advisors to South Vietnam with limited understanding of the political viability of Diem’s unpopular regime.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter contends that overprecision in US estimates about the political conditions in Cuba led officials to believe they could secure a relatively favorable outcome through the use of force. When bargaining failed to produce an equivalently attractive outcome, they abandoned negotiations and authorized the use of force. US estimates, which received little input from State Department officials, precluded the possibility that Castro’s control of the population made Cuba a very tough type to fight. This estimative error paved the path toward the Bay of Pigs. Deliberations and events preceding the Brigade’s assault accord
with the theory’s causal pathway. In addition to fleshing out the theory’s parameters, the case study helps rule out alternative hypotheses. A simple selection story whereby Kennedy was pre-disposed to use force and thus precluded State Department input is inconsistent with the facts. Similarly, State officials (and others) were uncertain, not pessimistic or dovish.

An added benefit of the case study is that it provides inductive insights into processes left unspecified in the theory. In principle, overprecision at the executive level could follow from either marginalization of advisers or from that marginalization coupled with overprecision at the level of the advisers who are not marginalized. As in the quantitative chapter, the Bay of Pigs lends support to the second pathway. Kennedy’s failure to solicit unfettered input from a diverse set of sources was a necessary condition for his own estimative overprecision and it was only further compounded by the already overprecise estimates Dulles and Bissell provided. Kennedy’s solicitation shortcomings further shed light on the generative processes of overprecision. Selective exposure and the correlational neglect it can induce drove the estimative error, not selective perception. The President did not ignore input from alternative information sources, he simply did not seek it.

With hindsight, the failure at Playa Giron is overdetermined. Others have rightly emphasized the military and logistical shortcomings of the operation as well as the implausibility of plausible deniability. Extant accounts, however, understate the importance of estimates over Cuba’s political attributes in driving Kennedy’s strategic considerations. Highlighting these estimates and the process that gave rise to them offers a new perspective on the “perfect failure” while reemphasizing a fundamental objective of this project. Beliefs shape strategic choices. But beliefs do not inherently emerge from a flawless accounting of the strategic environment. They are outcomes of subjective processes vulnerable to human fallibility without easy solutions in terms of either optimizing the interagency process or forcing executives to recognize their own estimative shortcomings. Both considerations point to policy prescriptions that follow from the theory and the case, which are only made doubly apparent in Chapter 5’s analysis of the Iraq War. Kennedy’s self-excoriation—“How could I have been so stupid?”—is well-earned, but it masks the daunting challenges executives
confront in assessing the opponent.

The next chapter’s study augments the Bay of Pigs case, illustrating the theory’s causal chain in action once again while also providing new vantage points on key contentions. For instance, the substantive political attribute that mattered took a different form. Rather than uprisings affecting military success, in Iraq it was postwar stability which would dictate the political outcome the US could impose after dispatching Saddam’s regime. Extant theories abstract away the challenge of translating military gains into political objectives. The Iraq case brings this to the fore. Moreover, the case offers additional insights as to why officials marginalize diplomats, highlighting failures of those charged with managing the interagency process—the President and NSA—as well as the nature of State’s main analytical product which lacked operational details. The Iraq case also extends the temporal domain of the empirics beyond the Cold War, illustrating the continued pertinence of marginalization and the resulting overprecision as causes of war.
It is hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam’s security forces and his army—hard to imagine.

–Paul Wolfowitz (Ricks 2006, p. 97-98)

The concept was that we would defeat the army, but the institutions would hold, everything from ministries to police forces.

–Condoleezza Rice (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 142)

When we arrived in Baghdad, everybody had gone home. The regime officials were gone . . . what in fact happened, which was unanticipated at least in [my mind], is that when [we] decapitated the regime, everything below it fell apart.

–General William Wallace (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 18, 69)

5.1 Post-Saddam Stability and Bargaining Failure

Coalition forces began their formal occupation of Baghdad on 9 April, 2003, less than three weeks after Operation Iraqi Freedom began. The speed with which they took control of the Iraqi capital, iconically captured by the destruction of Saddam’s statue in Firdos Square, surpassed the expectations of military planners at US Central Command (CENTCOM) and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). Tommy Franks, Commander of CENTCOM, viewed the fall of Baghdad as the transition point into Phase IV operations, or the posthostilities phase of the war. Senior Bush administration officials anticipated that the collapse of Saddam’s military forces would mark a decisive end to combat, that security and stability would quickly follow, and that extant Iraqi institutions could be redirected toward achieving Coalition objectives. This was a war of “liberation, not occupation;” the
US stay in Iraq would be brief. None of these expectations were borne out.

Coalition forces failed to translate their military successes into the realization of the political objectives for which the war was fought in the first place. Iraqi urban centers, first and foremost Baghdad, descended into chaos with mass looting including the gutting and destruction of political ministries. Indigenous military and police forces “melted away” and Coalition forces lacked the personnel and guidelines to reestablish law and order. Basic services such as water and electricity provision faltered. These conditions and the consequent questioning of Coalition motives and capabilities provided the kindling for the escalating violence and insurgency that thwarted US objectives for the subsequent decade.

This chapter demonstrates how overprecision about political conditions in Iraq contributed to the bargaining failure that gave rise to the war. The Iraq War was costly. The initial five years claimed the lives of thousands of Iraqi soldiers, US soldiers, and Iraqi civilians, caused mass destruction of Iraqi facilities and infrastructure, and cost the US an estimated $3 trillion. A more efficient resolution to the underlying disputes surely existed. The bargaining framework focuses our attention on explaining the inefficiency of costly conflict.

This chapter offers further qualitative evidence consistent with the dissertation’s theory. Moreover, it illustrates implications of the theory and the full causal chain in ways that elude quantitative testing. The theory predicts that marginalizing diplomats contributes to overprecise assessments of an adversary’s political attributes that affect expected payoffs to war. This overprecision produces onerous bargaining demands that adversaries are likely to reject. Conditions preceding the Iraq War were consistent with these expectations.

Iraq complements the Bay of Pigs case. Beyond providing additional evidence consistent with the theory, Iraq highlights an alternative dimension of political considerations that affect bargaining. Postwar expectations shape projections about the payoff to using force which in turn informs bargaining strategy. These postwar expectations are inherently political, resting on expectations about the US ability to impose its preferred policies on Iraq and the costs of doing so. Furthermore, the Iraq War illustrates the theory’s applicability outside
the Cold War context. While the bipolar Cold War background was beneficial for holding potential confounders constant in the quantitative tests, it necessarily limits generalizability. This case provides initial evidence that marginalization and overprecision remain pertinent outside of bipolarity.

The chapter begins by establishing the bargaining preliminaries, elucidating the stakes of the US-Iraqi dispute—namely, Iraq’s regional policy and the character of its regime and treatment of the Iraqi people—and highlighting bargaining efforts of US officials, culminating in an ultimatum two days before the war began.

With the preliminaries established, the chapter addresses each link in the theoretical chain. First, Iraq’s political characteristics shaped US estimates of the payoffs that could be secured through the use of force. Whereas the Bay of Pigs case highlighted that the likelihood of anti-Castro uprisings affected the Brigade’s probability of success, the Iraq case brings an alternative political attribute to the forefront. The theory contends that actors must translate combat accomplishments into the pursued political objectives. The post-conflict political landscape is thus crucial to estimating expected war payoffs.

Second, prevailing estimates of this post-conflict translation of military gains into political gains were narrow and generally devoid of uncertainty. Officials from the OSD and CENTCOM had strong priors over several attributes that would affect this translation. They expected a decisive defeat of Iraqi military forces and a swift transition to Phase IV. Additionally, they anticipated the Iraqi army and police would assist with postwar stability. These assessments had devastating consequences for the military plan itself which prioritized speed over mass. This emphasis proved well-suited for Phases I through III but was contrary to all theories of successful Phase IV operations barring the rapid resumption of stability that administration officials projected. Additionally, they eschewed the “nation building” associated with the prior administration. Instead, they preached “liberation, not occupation,” expecting a rapid transition to Iraqi governance after skimming off the top few

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1Ongoing classification of primary materials is the trade-off to establishing contemporary relevance. I make use of the limited primary documents that are available, first hand accounts from decision-making participants, US military and RAND studies, and a host of more journalistic accounts of the war.
percent of Baath Party elites from the pre-war ministries. Narrow assessments of the state of Iraqi infrastructure exacerbated these cost estimates. Officials’ beliefs about postwar stability and governance conditions shaped their expectations about the payoff to fighting. These OSD and CENTCOM expectations held sway with President Bush.

Third, others were less certain about these attributes based on available information before the war. Advisory channels that are typically sought out during national security decision-making processes held estimates with greater uncertainty. An enormous State Department analysis, The Future of Iraq, cast doubt on the feasibility of rapid power transfers, post-combat security, and the state of Iraqi infrastructure. A joint intelligence community product released two months before the war raised complementary concerns. Numerous think tank reports, cited by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, raised questions about the post-Saddam security environment and Iraq’s ripeness for the Bush administration’s preferred postwar regime. Analyses of prior Phase IV missions and war-games indicated the inadequacy of Coalition troop levels, as famously highlighted by General Shinseki as well as Retired General Zinni and Secretary of State Powell.

Fourth, I show that the President’s assessment, largely adopted from the OSD and CENTCOM estimates, was overprecise. Evaluated ex ante, it was overprecise for the reasons enumerated above. Readily available information before the war suggested greater uncertainty was warranted. Evaluated ex post, the assessment was overprecise as many realized outcomes were worse than the administration’s worst-case predictions. Even Doug Feith, Rumsfeld’s Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, suggests the insurgency’s intensity and scope exceeded any expectations.²

Fifth, I link these overprecise estimates to US bargaining demands and the breakdown in diplomacy. What states believe they can acquire through force determines the range of bargains they deem mutually acceptable. High certainty regarding the war payoff led to steep US demands on Saddam. Officials deemed his lack of full capitulation and exile as

²Due to space constraints, my account focuses on prewar planning for post-Saddam Iraq and the immediate aftermath of Saddam’s fall. The analysis does not consider Paul Bremer’s Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the 2007 surge, or other factors linked to postwar governance in Iraq.
less attractive than what they could impose on Iraq through military force. Sixth, the chapter demonstrates that those expressing greater uncertainty, particularly State Department officials, had limited input during the assessment process. Unlike past US wars, the Department of Defense (DoD) had full authority over postwar planning and governance. Moreover, senior Bush officials gave scant attention to State’s primary postwar study, the Future of Iraq. State’s marginalization was not due to its antipathy toward the war itself. No senior State Department official voiced opposition to the war. Rather, marginalization followed from a combination of breakdowns in the interagency process that National Security Advisor (NSA) Rice could, or did, not correct, limited operational applicability of the Future of Iraq project, and peculiarities of the personnel occupying senior positions at State.

Beyond illustrating the theory’s applicability to the Iraq War, the chapter offers a new perspective on the cause of the war. In the spirit of Lake (2010), my account brings estimative errors to the forefront. The perceived payoff to fighting is difficult to reconcile with any conception of Bayesian updating. Strongly held priors and selective updating about postwar stability drove administration beliefs, despite evidence dictating greater uncertainty. Moving beyond Lake’s account, the present one offers a theoretical framework to understand why these assessment errors occurred and highlights the pivotal role asymmetric information played in the bargaining failure, a point that Lake dismisses. Others contest Lake’s point on the necessity of invoking estimative errors to explain the Iraq War (Debs and Monteiro 2014; Coe 2011), in effect salvaging rationalist explanations for conflict. As with these accounts, I agree, as laid out in the theory, that actors behaved rationally conditional on their prewar beliefs. In this sense a purely strategic account captures the bargaining dynamics. But such accounts struggle to explain the origin of these prewar beliefs, which again defy reasonable interpretations of belief formation and information assimilation. Strategic accounts, including this one, all build on the basic premise that beliefs about payoffs to war, whether through the costs to fighting or the expected political resolution to fighting, affect whether bargaining fails. Contingency on these beliefs merely highlights the need to explain them.

Finally, the chapter addresses alternative explanations. Perhaps the estimative problem
is better attributed to overoptimism than overprecision. Though optimism is evident ex post, this is consistent with all asymmetric information accounts of war, including my own. Supported by numerous postmortems, I argue that the estimates for the most probable outcomes were not unjustifiable, but the certainty of the estimates and consequent dearth of contingency planning was. Another explanation could attribute the war to divergent bureaucratic preferences, particularly at DoD. I address the plausibility of this explanation as well as the challenges of falsifying preference-based accounts. Other accounts of the war highlight a condition that I relegate to the background: commitment problems due to Saddam's purported weapons program. President Bush was undoubtedly concerned with shifting power. As a result, my theory is consistent with the case but is a necessarily incomplete account. Even so, the viability of a commitment problem argument hinges on estimates of the payoff to preventive strikes, which again only illustrates the importance of explaining the origin of these estimates and their overprecision.

5.2 Regional Sway and Authoritarianism

I begin by specifying what was being bargained over, or the issue in dispute. This is not obvious in the US-Iraq case. Many accounts take the purported presence of Iraqi WMD stockpiles and development programs as the issue at stake. However, these capabilities and the threat of their further augmentation are not ends in themselves, or at least not the totality of issues of stake, but rather means by which Iraq could pursue its ends (see Fearon (1997a)). Though a contested issue in prewar diplomacy, the weapons program was not the fundamental issue to split.

Regime change offers another false lead in specifying the stakes. Bush administration rhetoric, following stated US policy dating back to the first Bush administration, harped on displacing Saddam from power (Ricks 2006, p. 5). However, Lake (2010) rightly notes that regime change was a derived preference based on Saddam's intransigence. More generally, regime change is an incomplete objective if it fails to specify the content and character of
the replacement regime. 

I argue that the source of contestation was two-dimensional. First, US and Iraq held conflicting preferences over policy and sway in the region. Three consecutive US administrations sought to preserve and extend US interests in the region, as well as those of US partners and clients, against Iraqi threats. Second, the adversaries bargained over the character of the Iraqi regime and its treatment of the Iraqi populace.

On the first, US and Iraq held conflicting preferences for regional dynamics dating back to at least the Gulf War. Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait challenged the sovereignty of a US client, threatened Saudi Arabia, and consequently posed a risk to the global supply of oil. Attacks against Israel exacerbated these dynamics. Rice articulated US objectives in an August 2002 memo, “Iraq: Goals, Objectives, and Strategy.” After listing the instrumental goal of halting WMD efforts, Rice lists the broader goal of ending the Iraqi threat to its neighbors (Feith 2008, p. 288). Numerous accounts and US war plans similarly contend that the extent of Iraqi challenges to its Gulf neighbors was a paramount concern for US officials (SIGIR 2009, p. 21, Lake 2010, p. 15, Woodward 2004, p. 42).

On the second, the Bush administration emphasized the autocratic character of the Iraqi regime and its treatment of its citizenry. Though often dismissed as rhetoric to garner international and domestic support for the war, there is evidence that administration officials took the issue seriously. In her August memo, Rice writes that US objectives include ending Saddam’s tyranny over his own people and creating a society characterized by “moderation, pluralism, democracy” (Feith 2008, p. 288). The extent to which administration officials pursued this objective both prewar and following Saddam’s fall belies the notion that it was empty talk. Investments in representative governance, drafting a constitution, and holding elections illustrate the point. Moreover, this objective resolves the ambiguity noted above as to what a policy of regime change entails by specifying what comes next.

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Cordesman (2002) makes a similar point in a prescient report four months before the war. Hypothetically, a state could have no affirmative vision of what comes after regime displacement, but it is hard to conceive of an example with such ambivalence.
5.2.1 Bargaining Efforts

Explicit and implicit bargaining over the Iraqi threat to its neighbors and its treatment of its populace date back to the immediate post-Gulf War period. Stopping short of Baghdad, the first Bush administration sought regime change through agents, believing Saddam’s hold on power was precarious following the war. By dropping leaflets and mobilizing support for coup attempts, US policy helped foment mass uprisings by Shiites in the south and counter-regime efforts by Kurds in the north. Having sparked the desired anti-regime efforts, the US opted not to offer assistance. Saddam struck down the opposition, killing potentially 20,000 Shiites in the process (Ricks 2006, p. 5).

Having failed to displace Saddam, the US adopted a policy of “containment,” aiming to constrain the Iraqi threat to its neighbors. Containment entailed US enforcement of no fly zones in the north and south, joint military exercises with Kuwait near the Iraqi border, and broad based sanctions. Airstrikes against Iraqi anti-aircraft capabilities were a regular feature of the no fly zone enforcement. Operation Desert Fox, four days of airstrikes in 1998, was the high point of hostilities in this period. To the surprise of US officials, the strikes reportedly destabilized the regime exposing Saddam’s vulnerability. US clients in the region conveyed their concern about the chaos that might follow Saddam’s fall (Ricks 2006, pp. 12,18-20, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 26).

George W. Bush’s administration brought new perspectives on containment. Before 9/11, Secretary of State Powell and Deputy Secretary of State Armitage pushed for “smart sanctions” (Ricks 2006, p. 28). These amounted to more targeted restrictions on Iraq that theoretically restricted dual-use technology transfers while easing the humanitarian plight of Iraqi civilians. In a pre-9/11 memo, Rumsfeld even raised the prospect of explicit negotiations with Saddam, suggesting they might “take a crack at initiating contact with Saddam Hussein. He has his own interests. It may be that, for whatever reason, at his stage in life he might prefer to not have the hostility of the United States and the West and might be willing to make some accommodation” (Feith 2008, p. 211). Though he foresaw only a “small” like-
lihood of a successful accommodation, it is nonetheless telling that administration officials recognized the potential for a more efficient negotiated settlement.

More proximate to the 2003 war, Powell urged the President to bring the dispute before the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In an extended 5 August 2002 private meeting with Bush, Powell made that case that a broader coalition and legal authorization would bring additional bargaining leverage to bear against Saddam. This effort culminated in the unanimous adoption of UNSC Resolution 1441, warning Iraq of “serious consequences” in the event of a “material breach” and requiring extensive documentation of past and present WMD programs. In concessions of debatable magnitude, Saddam allowed inspectors to return in December and provided an 11,807 page report on Iraq’s weapons programs (Feith 2008, p. 342, Woodward 2004, p. 149,226,234). Hans Blix deemed the report insufficient, as did all Bush administration officials.

The President began referring to war as “inevitable” within the NSC after the obfuscating declaration (SIGIR 2009, p. 33). In a January 2003 discussion with Rumsfeld, the President reportedly said, “we’re going to have to do this I’m afraid. I don’t see how we’re going to get him to a position where he will do something in a manner that’s consistent with the UN requirements, and we’ve got to make an assumption that he will not” (Woodward 2004, p. 261). Nonetheless, at the request of UK Prime Minister Blair, the administration returned to the UNSC seeking a second resolution explicitly authorizing the use of force. French Foreign Minister de Villepin—“nothing justifies envisaging military action”—ended any hope for a second resolution or even bringing additional leverage against Saddam to facilitate diplomacy (DeYoung 2006, p. 434). Stifled at the UN and with the path for British cooperation cleared after Blair secured Parliamentary backing, Bush issued an explicit ultimatum on 17 April calling for Saddam and his sons Uday and Qusay to leave Iraq within 48 hours (SIGIR 2009, p. 53). Saddam rejected the proposal and war commenced.

Wolfowitz and Feith simultaneously pursued a quixotic alternative path. They sought to train Iraqi exiles at a Hungarian facility to infiltrate and control southern Iraq, potentially using that as a bridgehead to a full assault on Baghdad. Franks offered no support for this mission, telling Feith “I don’t have time for this fucking bullshit” (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 105,106, Ricks 2006, p. 23). In total, 73 exiles received any form of training.
The Iraq War, as with all wars according to canonical bargaining theory, was ex post inefficient. Mutually preferable deals existed that the two sides failed to identify. What form might these deals have taken? Late efforts by Egyptian and Saudi representatives hint at one path. Their representatives reported to administration officials that Iraqi emissaries were floating the possibility of Saddam going into exile with his family and $2 billion (Woodward 2004, p. 314). US officials were unenthusiastic about the prospect, though the reasoning behind the response is murky. It is ambiguous whether Saddam’s exile, as President’s ultimatum dictated, would have insured peace. Feith suggested “we cannot accept surrender” (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 72). More generally, the issue relates back to the stakes in dispute. A new Baathist regime stifling weapons inspections and implementing similar policies toward neighbor states and its own population may not have skirted war. Mutually preferable bargains existed, even if the precise form is difficult to discern (but see Coe (2011)).

5.3 Overprecision at the Pentagon and Oval Office

This section has multiple objectives. First, it establishes that Iraq’s political, not solely military, attributes were key for assessing war payoffs. Second, I detail what these attributes were and how OSD and CENTCOM assessed them. Third I establish that these estimates held sway with the President. Fourth, I highlight that officials from State, the intelligence community, Congress, and outside the government expressed greater uncertainty. Fifth, this section establishes that the OSD, CENCTOM, and ultimately the President’s estimates were overprecise, both ex ante and ex post. Sixth, the section links the estimative certainty to onerous US bargaining demands and bargaining failure.

5.3.1 Importance of Political Attributes

Expected payoffs to war dictate which diplomatic outcomes are mutually preferable to fighting. The US payoff to the Iraq War hinged on (1) its ability to translate combat success
into the political outcomes which it sought and (2) the costs of doing so. Each of these components depended on political, not strictly military, conditions in Iraq. Both entail assessing post-combat dynamics that might interfere with imposing a preferred policy outcome. Bargaining models abstract away this difficulty, assuming that battlefield outcomes shaped by the $p$ parameter directly correspond to the final settlement of the contested resource. This follows the Clausewitzian notion that victory in war entails the ability to impose one’s will on the enemy. However, this offers an ideal type of what constitutes military victory, masking the often more varied nature of combat resolutions (Sullivan 2007). Instead, we might profitably think of $p$ as the expected political settlement of the dispute, rather than a strictly combat or military parameter. Doing so directly incorporates translation considerations into the framework shaping the bargaining process.

Richard Lugar, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called attention to translation concerns in February 2003:

we must avoid any tendency to view military operations in Iraq as separate from reconstruction of Iraq ... We must not assume that our commitment of armed forces will end if and when Saddam Hussein is dislodged from power. Even under the best post-Saddam scenarios, Iraq will remain an enormous security challenge that is likely to require substantial American and allied troops (Future of Iraq 2003, p. 1).

The proposed reconceptualization admits the possibility that a state may win the war but lose the peace. Dismantling extant policies is not equivalent to installing preferred policies. Stability and security are prerequisites for imposing a victor’s preferred policy outcomes. Anarchy, looting, and ongoing bouts of violence impede efforts to consolidate political gains. Hence, when estimating the political payoffs to war, states must assess the likelihood of achieving conditions amenable to policy imposition. I argue that for the Iraq War case, it was this assessment that proved most important and problematic. Establishing stability, while in part a military consideration, is also a deeply political one. What follows regime destruction? Will extant institutions hold to help reestablish law and order? What is the nature of the fight that will ensue? Though officials disagreed on the prospects for postwar
stability, its importance was evident to all informed participants in the decision-making process:

Senator Biden: maintaining a secure environment after a possible war with Iraq is going to be the sine qua non for any positive change we wish to bring to Iraq (Future of Iraq 2003, p. 5).

General Zinni: Internal order will be the most critical factor in keeping positive momentum and progressing toward full reconstruction. No. 1 task is keeping order in this country (Future of Iraq 2003, p. 62).

National Intelligence Council Report: top priorities of most Iraqis would be to obtain peace, order, stability (Principal Challenges in Post-Saddam Iraq 2003, p. 10).

General Franks worried about “catastrophic success” wherein a rapid collapse of Saddam’s regime would fracture the country before Coalition forces were in place to provide stability.

What would determine postwar stability? I focus on five attributes. First, a decisive end to the combat phase would ease the aforementioned translation process. Assessing prospects for a decisive combat conclusion required an understanding of how political power was distributed in Saddam’s Iraq—whether it was centralized such that Saddam’s fall would undermine resistance or was it distributed such that extant or new political actors would perpetuate violence in Saddam’s wake. Second, stability and its costs would depend on whether the Iraqi army and police could contribute to reestablishing law and order. Determining the feasibility of this required a grasp of each institution’s cohesiveness and the roles it played in Saddam’s Iraq. Third, postwar capabilities of Iraqi ministries were essential for implementing US policy preferences and enabling a prompt US exit. Assessing these prospects demanded information about how civil servants would respond to Saddam’s fall and whether these facilities were safe from the threat of looting in an anarchic Baghdad. Fourth, quickly imposing policies required a functional Iraqi authority that could assume authority from Coalition forces. A grasp of tribal, ethnic, and sectarian cleavages as well as how “internals” would greet “externals”—Iraqi exiles—was essential to determining the viability of “liberation, not occupation.” Finally, reconstruction requirements, particularly for basic services like water and electricity, would shape stability itself and the costs confronting
a US occupation.

Postwar stability’s importance for imposing US preferences and minimizing costs was recognized ex ante, as noted above. The inability of Coalition forces to provide immediate stability undermined all of its subsequent efforts. It opened a power vacuum that remnants of the Baathist regime, foreign fighters, retribution seekers, and profiteers filled. For those on the sidelines, the lack of security demonstrated either a lack of US capacity or a lack of US interest in protecting Iraqi civilians (Lake 2010, p. 39, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 155, Allawi 2008, p. 189). The latter interpretation generally held sway after the impressive military destruction of Saddam’s authority led Iraqis to question how such a powerful force could fail to control looting or restore water and electricity (Wright and Reese 2008, p. 91). Violence became “self-perpetuating”: the less adept the Coalition forces were at stopping it, the less Iraqis were willing to cooperate or provide the information necessary to stifle the budding insurgency (Feith 2008, p. 415). Disorder following the occupation of Baghdad paved the way for years of national disorder.

5.3.2 Pentagon’s High-Certainty Estimate of Postwar Conditions

This section describes OSD and CENTCOM assessments of the five political attributes noted in the prior section. Each of these, and their interactions, guided US expectations for the expected payoff to war. After detailing OSD and CENTCOM estimates over these attributes, I illustrate how the content of those estimates informed US war plans, which emphasized a light troop footprint and race to Baghdad, and the postwar planning process, which centered on a rapid handover of governing authority.

Decisive End to Combat

What were the prospects for immediate stability after Saddam’s fall? CENTCOM estimated, with near certainty, that combat operations and anti-Coalition violence would dissipate with Saddam’s removal. A CENTCOM report on Phase IV estimated that “Continued armed opposition to Coalition forces [is] unlikely once Saddam flees or is captured/killed.
Most loyal tribesman will cease fighting for the regime once the outcome becomes apparent” (Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq 2007, p. 95, Ricks 2006, p. 138). CENTCOM and OSD officials based their war plans on the expectation that a decisive end to the military campaign would yield a stable security environment (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. xx).

Strong assumptions about the Iraqi center of gravity underpinned the estimate. Franks and Rumsfeld believed that Iraqi political power was centralized in Baghdad. Once the central hub was dismantled, non-Baghdad threats to Coalition forces would dissipate. Franks recounts, “The capital was the center of gravity of the Baathist regime . . . Therefore, Coalition forces had to advance on Baghdad so rapidly—bypassing and fixing enemy formation in place—that the capital would be cut off before Iraqi divisions could fall back and turn the sprawling city in to a ‘fortress,’ as many feared it might become” (Franks 2004, p. 476). The US Army’s study of immediate postwar conditions in Iraq corroborates Franks’ contention that Baghdad, and really Saddam and senior officials, were considered the center of gravity, which if destroyed would remove the adversary’s ability to fight (Wright and Reese 2008, p. 14). Decentralized attacks by Fedayeen forces and restive elements in the Sunni Triangle would prove otherwise, as detailed in a later section (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 498-499).

A lack of plans and resources for restoring post-Saddam stability is indicative of official predictions. There was no discussion of stability when Feith briefed the President on postwar considerations on 4 March (Woodward 2004, p. 328). The prior summer Franks claimed that “lord mayors” in each town would establish tranquility, which apparently satisfied the President and principals in attendance (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 160). Limited consideration on these points illustrates the certainty behind the estimate of a decisive end to violence and manifested itself in a lack of guidance for forces on the ground. General McKiernan, Commander of Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), received instructions that his forces should not play a role in implementing or upholding laws and eschew invoking martial law to reestablish order. CFLCC responsibilities in the immediate aftermath were poorly articulated and, McKiernan contends, would have likely been irrelevant.
as there “simply were not enough American troops in Baghdad, a city of 5.5 million people, after 9 April 2003 to impose order” (Wright and Reese 2008, p. 141). Moreover, the forces present lacked the training and resources necessary to impose it.

Reorientation of Iraqi Army and Police

To the extent there were concerns about immediate stability, officials believed the Iraqi police and regular army—as opposed to Fedayeen, Al Quds, Republican Guard, or Special Republican Guard units—could assist in reestablishing order. OSD officials anticipated employing this manpower to maintain public order, though they attribute this expectation to CIA intelligence (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 105, Feith 2008, p. 362-365). Regardless of the source, the OSD estimate lacked equivocation. CENTCOM was similarly certain that US forces could reorient the army and police toward its desired ends. Franks expected a two to three month stabilization phase which hinged upon a functioning Iraqi army contributing to the effort. McKiernan, relying on these assessments, anticipated that the army and police could operate alongside US forces in the post-Saddam period. To help assure such support would be forthcoming, CENTCOM dropped leaflets before the war, encouraging army units to disband and then assist Coalition forces as they arrived (Herspring 2008, p. 104, Bensahel et al. 2008, p. xxiv,9,139-140, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 145).

These assumptions, and inherent tensions casting doubt on them, were never seriously challenged. The war plan entailed destroying the Iraqi military’s command and control. Yet officials expected to quickly reestablish and reorient the army despite having destroyed the central mechanisms by which these forces could be coordinated (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 145). To Packer (2005, p. 18), “Plan A was that the Iraqi government would be quickly decapitated, security would be turned over to the remnants of the Iraqi police and army, international troops would soon arrive, and most American forces would leave within a few months. There was no Plan B.”
Expectation of Functioning Ministries and Governance Transfers

OSD and CENTCOM officials, based on the assessments detailed above, expected a decisive end to the combat phase of war and a consequent return to security stability. To extend the stability to other domains and begin the process of implementing its preferred policy outcomes, the US needed Iraqi institutions to continue functioning. Functional administrative capacity would allow the US to quickly transfer authority to Iraqis and thus limit the costs of postwar governance. Jay Garner’s Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) recognized the importance of keeping Iraqi ministries standing. However, they never challenged assumptions about their ability to do so (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 58).

Believing that the state apparatus would remain viable post-Saddam, Feith testified in February 2003 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Our goal is to transfer as much authority as possible, as quickly as possible, to the Iraqis themselves” (Future of Iraq 2003, p. 16). Doing so would minimize US administrative costs and avoid the appearance of an extended US occupation of a state with historically grounded animosity toward the possibility. Feith’s Office of Special Planning took the lead in developing the handoff plans. They anticipated quickly standing up an Interim Iraqi Authority (IIA) that would jointly administer national ministries alongside Coalition officials, primarily from the Defense and to a lesser extent State Departments. IIA would then render itself irrelevant by organizing a constitutional convention and elections to establish a non-interim government.5

Despite being developed primarily in the two weeks before the invasion, this framework guided postwar governance policy for many officials. One ORHA planner saw little need to craft a governance strategy given that the “expectations derived from policy set in Washington were that the establishment and devolution of authority to an Iraqi entity would proceed quickly.” According to an Army War College summary, military Phase IV planning rested on the assumption of a “quick handoff to Iraqi interim administration.” The President, though

5Though by no means causal, it is worth noting that Ahmed Chalabi provided Pentagon briefings endorsing the viability of similar plans (Feith 2008 p. 403-407, Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 18).

Prospects for Liberation, not Occupation

High-certainty assessments about the redeployment of extant administrative capacities and a quick transfer of power reflected administration opposition to the state building it associated with the Clinton administration. Bush campaigned for the White House saying “I don’t think our troops ought to used for what’s called nation building” and this sentiment, by all accounts, remained in place before the Iraq war (Feith 2008, p. 279, Ricks 2006, p. 25). OSD viewed US efforts in Haiti, Kosovo, Bosnia, and to some extent Afghanistan as costly failures. Avoiding what Rumsfeld termed a “culture of dependency” in postwar states, the administration adopted the mantra, “liberation, not occupation” (Ricks 2006, p. 106, SIGIR 2009, p. 8, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 151). White House officials dismissed a USAID briefing which encouraged US-led development of a professional corps of Iraqi civil servants as precisely the nation building they planned to avoid. To Feith (2008, p. 401), “Rumsfeld remained convinced that the United State should hand authority to the Iraqis as quickly as possible after Saddam’s overthrow.” Based on expectations of a decisive end to combat operations, a quick restoration of stability, and a functional postwar administrative capacity, OSD and CENTCOM officials expected to quickly devolve authority from Coalition hands.

The administration’s assessment that Iraqis would welcome US forces reinforced the projected viability of the plan. Famously, Vice President Cheney responded to Senator Biden’s questioning, “I think we’ll be greeted as liberators” (Woodward 370). Wolfowitz, in congressional hearings, stated, “I am reasonably certain that they will greet us as liberators, and that will help us keep our requirements down” (Ricks 98).

Such assessments, and the lack of contingency planning around them, affected logistical aspects of the war plan. Staff members of the JCS attributed the lack of additional planning to the assumption “that everything would be fine after the war, that they’d be happy to get rid of Saddam” (Ricks 2006, p. 109-110). The lack of planning for postwar governance
was not an oversight. It was partly a choice based on articulated estimates, with a high degree of certainty, regarding the postwar political landscape that would greet Coalition forces. Richard Perle offered more explicit evidence on this point, “There is no plan for an extended occupation in Iraq. The size of the force to maintain order will be much smaller than people believe” (Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 169). OSD leadership, despite lip-service noted below, failed to consider alternative scenarios for postwar governance.

Reconstruction Costs

The final political attribute pivotal to estimating the expected war payoff for the US was the state of Iraqi infrastructure. Officials hoped to restore prewar levels of water and electricity in short order and thus opted not to target vital infrastructure nodes (Bensahel et al. 2008 p. 214, Franks 2004 p. 480). Despite a professed dearth of intelligence on the state of Iraqi infrastructure after more than a decade of sanctions and airstrikes, OSD officials expected limited reconstruction costs. When Garner confronted Rumsfeld, projecting that postwar reconstruction will cost billions of dollars, Rumsfeld apparently replied “My friend, if you think we’re going to spend a billion dollars of our money over there, you are sadly mistaken.” Wolfowitz, when confronted with a projected reconstruction budget of $95 billion responded “I don’t think he or she knows what he is talking about.” To control costs, both CENTCOM and ORHA counted on using the Iraqi military to assist with construction efforts, which of course assumed the military was still standing and functional (SIGIR 2009 p. 42, 76, Ricks 2006 p. 98,104, Feith 2008 p. 367).

War Plan

High-certainty estimates about immediate stability and assistance from extant Iraqi institutions and forces influenced OSD and CENTCOM planning for the combat phases of the war. Franks and Rumsfeld emphasisized speed and risk from the first meeting on Iraq in November 2001 (Rumsfeld 2001). Both men privileged speed over mass. For Rumsfeld doing so would demonstrate the military “transformation” he hoped to install in his tenure
at Defense. To Franks, “Desert Storm had reinforced my conviction that maneuver speed and tactical surprise were the greatest force multipliers in war . . . The size of our attack force was less important than the speed and flexibility of its maneuver” (Franks 2004 p. 368). Coupling this faith in speed and belief that Baghdad was the Iraqi center of gravity generated a war plan that envisioned a race to Baghdad—“haul ass and bypass” as Franks (2004 p. 400) wrote. Holding towns was inessential and Coalition forces would arrive in the West and North in smaller numbers at later dates (SIGIR 2009 p. 54).

As a consequence, when Baghdad fell 25,000 troops occupied a city of 5.5 million—a 4:1000 ratio versus a typical benchmark of 20:1000 (SIGIR 2009 p. 57). Beyond Baghdad, speed foregoes securing gains or dominating population centers. Crucial urban areas, particularly those in Anbar province, were marked as “economy of force” areas due to troop limitations (Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 105,500).

The war plan was designed for “destruction and annihilation,” not consolidating peace and political stability (Wilson 2007 p. 18). Nowhere was this more evident than in deliberations about troop sizes. General Zinni developed the pre-existing war plan for Iraq, OPLAN 1003, in 1998. OPLAN 1003, which envisioned a tank centric reprisal of the Gulf War and extended stability operations, called for 500,000 troops. From the outset, Rumsfeld deemed this old thinking that failed to account for developments in precision-guided munitions, command-and-control technology, special forces, and the decimation of Iraqi military capabilities from extended sanctions, airstrikes, and no fly zones (SIGIR 2009 p. 34, Woodward 2004 p. 41, Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 37, DeYoung 2006 p. 375). After an initial briefing of Franks’ revised Commander’s Concept, Rumsfeld was pushing for troop numbers as low as 125,000.

By his December 2001 briefing to the President in Crawford, Franks had the numbers down to 275,000. When the war began 16 months later, CFLCC had land forces of 170,000 which could ramp up or down as deemed necessary (Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 28-32, Franks 2004 p. 439). A light footprint avoided extended force buildup timelines, plausibly retained an element of surprise, and provided for rapid maneuvers toward Baghdad. But
this speed came at the expense of mass, which was critical for postwar stability operations. For a quick frame of reference, Coalition forces would provide a postwar troop to population ratio of roughly 6:1000, versus the greater than 20:1000 benchmarks set in Malaya and the Balkans. Reflecting back, General Cross indicated there was high certainty about the form the war plan would assume: “It was quite clear . . . that he [Rumsfeld] and the system had made up their mind how they were going to fight this campaign, so anybody speaking outside that paradigm was not particularly well received” (Wright and Reese 2008, p. 170, Rapport 2012, p. 160, Graham 2009, p. 350,381-382,404-405).

The plans called for a rapid drawdown on the already light footprint. OSD officials expected force levels approaching 30,000 within 120 days (Ricks 2006, p. 106, Bensahel et al. 2008, p. xx). Wolfowitz projected a force posture of 34,000 within months. He testified before Congress:

There has been a good deal of comment—some of it quite outlandish—about what our postwar requirements might be in Iraq. Some of the higher end predictions that we have been hearing recently, such as the notion that it will take several hundred thousand US troops to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq, are wildly off the mark . . . it is hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam’s security forces and his army—hard to imagine . . . we can say with reasonable confidence that the notion of hundreds of thousands of American troops is way of the mark (Ricks 2006, p. 97-98).

Perle and Rumsfeld echoed this assessment. Franks, even amidst the chaos after Baghdad fell, instructed his commanders to “be prepared to take as much risk departing as they had in their push to Baghdad” and canceled the 1st Cavalry Division’s deployment (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 8, Wright and Reese 2008, p. 142).

Discussion

This section outlined five political attributes that affected US payoffs to fighting—that is, its ability to impose its preferred policies and the costs to do so. OSD and CENTCOM officials provided high-certainty assessments for each of these attributes. These assessments
shaped logistical planning for the war, in terms of the combat plan itself and the form and schedule of postwar governance.

This scratches the surface of postwar planning and some of the issues that plagued it. These efforts suffered on at least three other dimensions. First, there was rampant buck passing regarding responsibility for Phase IV operations.[6] Second, some contend that there was a dearth of postwar planning. The lack of planning at senior levels strikes me as intentional, rather than an oversight, following as a result of high-certainty estimates about the political landscape post-Saddam.[7] Rapport offers a contrasting account. Based on construal theory, he contends that heterogeneous time horizons led administration officials to prioritize detailed planning on Phases I-III while engaging in limited, abstract, and often optimistic planning for Phase IV. There was undoubtedly limited “intellectual energy” devoted to Phase IV within CENTCOM. Plans were hastily conceived compared to WWII, where officials at the Army War College began analyzing postwar Germany and Japan years before their plausible surrender (SIGIR 2009, p. 33, Bensahel et al. 2008, p. xviii, Ricks 2006, p. 33, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 139, Fallows 2006, p. 52, The Postwar Occupations of Germany and Japan: Implications for Iraq 2002).

Essentially every agency devoted to postwar governance lacked time and resources. Feith’s OSP received an apparent green light for its formation on 18 October 2002, only to have it rescinded when White House officials became concerned about the appearance of planning for postwar operations before exhausting diplomatic routes (SIGIR 2009, p. 12-13, Feith 2008, p. 316). Garner’s ORHA was formed 9 January 2003, only weeks before the

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6Franks insisted it fell to the State Department through summer 2002 (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 70,138), telling OSD “You pay attention to the day after, and I’ll pay attention to the day off” (Wright and Reese 2008, p. 70). Simultaneously, Feith tells a Senate Committee in February 2003, “There would be no question about who ultimately would be responsible if we wind up leading the coalition that takes control of the country. It would be the military commander. There would be no vacuum of authority” (Future of Iraq 2003, p. 30).

7A comprehensive RAND study contends “It is not the case that no one planned for post-Saddam Iraq. On the contrary, many agencies and organizations within the U.S. government identified a range of possible postwar challenges in 2002 and early 2003, before major combat commenced, and suggested strategies for addressing them. Some of these ideas seem quite prescient in retrospect. Yet few if any made it into the serious planning process for OIF” (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. xvii).
war. They were not supplied with the preexisting work on postwar governance and had few linguistic specialists. To Garner, “The Administration started way too late. We’ve only really been in business six weeks, and we only began to get people three weeks ago.” A Joint Chiefs designed task force to assess postwar issues, JTF IV, was formed even later, had to scrounge office supplies from trade fairs, and could only deduce its mission from Feith’s congressional testimony (SIGIR 2009 p. 36-46, Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 143-144, Bensahel et al. 2008 p. xxi,42,52).

Third, and directly following from the paragraph above, postwar planning was a bureaucratic mess. Overlapping and ambiguous authorities and responsibilities stifled efficient planning. Hostility was rampant between some agencies. Franks had to calm his CENTCOM staff, telling them “I’ll worry about OSD, all of them—including Doug Feith, who’s getting a reputation around here as the dumbest fucking guy on the planet” (Franks 2004 p. 362). When deploying to the region, ORHA was stationed 45 minutes from CFLCC, had limited access to the war plan, and was shuttled to Baghdad on 21 April, two weeks into the looting and chaos (Bensahel et al. 2008 p. xxii,66).

5.3.3 Assessment Certainty

Were OSD’s estimates actually lacking uncertainty? After all, Rumsfeld is famously associated with his framework entailing “unknown unknowns,” which seemingly undermines contentions of his certainty. Feith embraced Rumsfeld’s language, referencing the “need to deal strategically with uncertainty. The inability to predict the future. The limits on our knowledge and the limits on our intelligence” (Fallows 2006 p. 45). Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he said

Senator, it is hard to answer a lot of these what-if’s because a lot depends on future events that we do not know. As Secretary Rumsfeld likes to say, he says he does not know whether, if there is a war, it is going to be ‘4 days, 4 weeks or 4 months.’ A lot depends on, if there is a war, what the nature of the war is,

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8This ignores Bremer’s CPA and the policy reversals it implemented, which cannot be done justice within this chapter.
how much destruction there is, how much cooperation one gets, how many Iraqi units defect. There are enormous uncertainties . . . we are not in the predicting business (Future of Iraq 2003, p. 30,40).

This sentiment is part prudence, part obfuscation, and part falsehood. This dissertation’s central contention is that individuals often fail to recognize uncertainty attached to political attributes that will shape war outcomes. Any recognition of this uncertainty is a positive. But invoking the specter of uncertainty while simultaneously neglecting contingency planning and narrowly conceiving of likely outcomes is far from the prescriptive ideal. Perhaps more troubling is the contention that Feith, OSD, and senior officials in any administration are not in the “prediction business.” Put simply, they are. Diplomacy is shaped by officials’ expectations for conflict. OSD is charged with informing the President’s expectations. Their predictions are pivotal to war and peace. Protestations to the contrary do not change this.

More tangibly, Rumsfeld’s “Parade of Horribles” memo offers the starkest contrast to the certainty expressed throughout the prewar period. Enumerating worst-case scenarios, Rumsfeld includes:

US could fail to manage post-Saddam Hussein Iraq successfully . . . The dollar costs of the effort could prove to be greater than expected . . . Rather than having the post-Saddam effort require 2 to 4 years, it could take 8 to 10 years . . . Iraq could experience ethnic strife among Sunni, Shia and Kurds (Iraq: An Illustrative List of Potential Problems to be Considered and Addressed 2002).

But as Rapport notes, this memo is more puzzling than revealing. If such prospects were taken seriously, why was there no follow-up to it? Expectations continued to rest on the high-certainty, low-contingency planning estimates outlined throughout this section. Despite the linguistic gymnastics—what Powell referred to as Rumsfeld’s tendency to speak in the “third-person passive once removed”—and a single memo expressing uncertainty, OSD and CENTCOM operated with low-uncertainty assessments of multiple political attributes that shaped expectations for the US ability to achieve its desired political outcome in Iraq at low costs.
5.3.4 Centrality of Pentagon Estimates

President Bush, not officials from OSD or CENTCOM, authorized the Iraq War. Establishing that Bush adopted the estimative certainty of those in OSD and CENTCOM is a necessary link in the theory’s causal chain. If their estimates were downplayed and overridden by countervailing considerations then the assessment precision would be historically interesting but only tangentially related to the Iraq War. This section establishes the dominance of OSD and CENTCOM estimates in shaping the thinking and prevailing assessments of the President and other senior White House officials.  

OSD and CENTCOM centrality are evident on a strictly logistical level. The Department of Defense was given responsibility for managing all postwar efforts, which stood in contrast to prior US military operations. Rumsfeld requested such authorization in late 2002. Feith sought to limit State’s planning for the postwar process, arguing to Deputy National Security Advisor Hadley that State officials botched postwar considerations in Afghanistan (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 141, 147). Defense Department control manifested itself in a proliferation of agencies tasked with managing components of the Phase IV operation, all under DoD’s purview. Feith’s Office of Special Planing was perceived as the first among equals in the interagency postwar planning process (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 29). ORHA, formally established 20 January 2003 by National Security Presidential Directive 24, was placed within DoD and immediately superseded the NSC’s extant planning efforts. Franklin Miller, who chaired much of those efforts, said the message was “You don’t need to worry about the nuts and bolts of basic reconstruction. It’s now an [OSD] operation. Thereafter it was ‘you guys stay out, we don’t need your help’ ” (SIGIR 2009, p. 34). Rumsfeld closely monitored ORHA’s staffing, looking to stack it with DoD officials and vetoing some State Department personnel.

In addition to operational authority for all aspects of postwar planning, OSD and CENT-
COM had the President’s ear and controlled his information flow. OSD assumptions tended to prevail over counterarguments from other agencies. Bush, in keeping with his preexisting preferences, readily endorsed OSD’s vision of liberation, not occupation. Feith argues as much when justifying why his office, and not State, controlled planning for the postwar transfer of power to Iraqis (Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 148, Bensahel et al. 2008 p. xvii-xviii, Feith 2008 p. 279). Rice, managing the interagency process, adopted OSD viewpoints. To her, “The concept was that we would defeat the army, but the institutions would hold, everything from ministries to police forces. You would be able to bring new leadership but we were going to keep the body in place” (Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 142).

Bush was exposed to little discussion of postwar stability considerations. Franks provided his aforementioned “lord mayors” response to questions from the President, which apparently satisfied him. Garner gave a single briefing to Bush on the postwar environment. Bush and the principals struck Garner as unengaged, essentially deferring to OSD and CENTCOM expectations (Rapport 2012 p. 158, Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 160). As discussed, troop levels were intimately linked to assessments for postwar stability. Privileged access to the President to discuss force sizes was tantamount to shaping, or at least endorsing, aggregate assessments for postwar stability. Franks and Rumsfeld dominated this process, as is reasonable given the division of authority. Franks briefed the President in Crawford in December 2001, Camp David in May 2002, and the NSC multiple times during this period. Doubts about force sizes were typically raised in private channels, outside the President’s view.

5.3.5 Diplomats (and Others) Expressed Greater Uncertainty

OSD, CENTCOM, and the President neglected a wider range of potential outcomes. However, others foresaw, or least gave credence to, such outcomes. Diplomats were often at the forefront of recognizing greater uncertainty over these political attributes, though they were not the only ones. This was perhaps best encapsulated in State’s Future of Iraq study, which consisted of 17 planning groups working alongside exiled Iraqis to consider an array of postwar governance issues. The Special Investigator General for Iraq Reconstruc-
tion SIGIR (2009, p. 15) called this the “single most rigorous assessment conducted by the US government before the war.” Similarly, an Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) on “Principal Challenges in Post-Saddam Iraq,” initiated by State’s Policy Planning Staff, provided a thorough, well-researched full intelligence community product in January 2003. With the benefit of hindsight, Senator Feinstein deemed the ICA “generally good and right” (Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq 2007, p. 192).

Officials with additional or alternative information sources formed estimates with greater uncertainty. Moreover, these estimates were not in channels that officials typically ignore during decision-making processes. State Department officials are usually central to postwar planning. Reports from the entirety of the intelligence community are widely distributed. In fact, Hadley, Libby, Wolfowitz, Feith, Armitage, Chairman of the JCS Myers, and CIA Director Tenet all received the ICA (Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq 2007, p. 147). The rest of this section describes State Department (and other) assessments over the salient political attributes.

Stability Considerations

Critics dismiss the State Department’s Future of Iraq project as devoid of operational details. It was not a plan that could be implemented. Rather, it was a vast study of potential complications associated with dismantling Saddam’s regime and was valuable on those merits. On postwar stability, it stipulated that

Iraq will experience an enormous power vacuum with the disconcerting erosion of Baghdad’s power and the totalitarian apparatus that has dominated Iraqi political, economic and social life for the past thirty years ... atrocities have created entire groups of victims impatient for revenge and score-settling when the opportunity presents itself after a regime change with a possible breakdown of security structures ... The period immediately after regime change might offer these criminals an opportunity to engage in acts of killing, plunder, looting, etc. (Transparency and Anti-Corruption Measures Working Group 2003, p. 72, Transitional Justice Working Group 2003, p. 29).
It further instructed that Coalition forces must be prepared to “Impose a 24-hour curfew on the first day to be gradually relaxed according to the extent of security and order established” and to “organize military patrols by coalition forces in all major cities to prevent lawlessness, especially against vital utilities and key government facilities” (Transitional Justice Working Group 2003, p. 29). Senior State Department officials Ryan Crocker and William Burns echoed these concerns in a 12-page single-spaced report, “The Perfect Storm,” warning of internal strife and factional competition for dominance (SIGIR 2009, p. 13-14, DeYoung 2006, p. 459). Officials in State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research mentioned “serious planning gaps for post-conflict public security” which “would undermine an otherwise successful military campaign” (Memorandum to Under Secretary Dobriansky 2003).

The ICA on post-Saddam challenges similarly recognized the potential difficulties of reestablishing stability. It mentions possible “violence by competing factions in Iraq against each other or the United States—Sunni against Shia; Kurd against Kurd; Kurd against Arab; any against the United States,” the possibility that terrorist organizations could exploit the volatile situation, and risks that ex-Baathists “could forge an alliance with existing terrorist organizations or act independently to wage guerrilla warfare against the new government and Coalition forces” (Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq 2007, p. 7-8).

Rock Drill, a war-game ORHA organized four weeks before the invasion, illustrated that “civil unrest will be the rule, not the exception” (SIGIR 2009, p. 43). Garner contends that current force packages “risk letting much of the country descend into civil unrest, chaos whose magnitude may defeat our national strategy of a stable new Iraq, and more immediately, we place our own troops, fully engaged in the forward fight, in greater jeopardy” (Ricks 2006, p. 101-102). Garner briefed Franks, Rumsfeld, and NSC staffers while General Abizaid encouraged CENTCOM to investigate these conclusions (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 64, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 362).

Others foresaw the potential for stability challenges. Senator Chafee (R-RI) and Congressman Skelton (D-MO) asked about contingency planning for stability operations. The
Joint Staff and CFLCC officers worried about the ability to quickly reposition forces from combat posture to assist in stability missions, particularly if Saddam fell quickly (Future of Iraq 2003, p. 36, Ricks 2006, p. 36, Feith 2008, p. 292). Outside experts, including General Schwarzkopf who commanded the Persian Gulf military campaign questioned what postwar Iraq would look like, noting the potential for US forces to “walk into chaos.” General Zinni was concerned that the administration “didn’t understand the importance of maintaining order, that we had to come in with sufficient force to freeze the situation” (Ricks 2006, p. 71, 83). Jalal Talabani, a leading Kurdish exile, briefed Cheney and Rumsfeld about the potential for looting in August 2002, noting the impoverished state of the Iraqi population. A litany of think tanks and institutions associated with the US military (Army War College and National Defense University) issued reports warning of high violence levels and the potential to win the war but lose the peace.

Uncertainty about postwar stability spilled into uncertainty over the proper force size. Powell contacted Franks through private channels on multiple occasions. He warned about shortchanging himself on troops and was concerned that Franks and Rumsfeld were substituting speed for mass (DeYoung 2006, p. 394, Franks 2004, p. 393, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 32, Woodward 2004, p. 80). Likewise, Chief of Staff of the Army Eric Shinseki questioned the planned force size before the Senate Armed Services Committee. On requirements for postwar stability, he suggested “something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers, are probably, you know, a figure that would be required. We’re talking about post-hostilities control over a piece of geography that’s fairly significant, with the kinds of ethnic tensions that could lead to other problems. And so, it takes significant ground force presence to maintain a safe and secure environment to ensure that the people are fed, that water is distributed, all the normal responsibilities that go along with administering a situation like this” (Fallows 2006, p. 97-98).

Commanders from CFLCC estimated that postwar operations would require 300,000 troops to patrol the border, secure population centers, and protect oil assets. A study from the ill-fated JTF IV estimated, based on recent experiences in the Balkans, that 350,000
to 500,000 troops were required to stabilize Iraq. Zinni, expounding on his OPLAN 1003, suggested the “reason we had those extra two divisions was the security situation. Revenge killings, crime, chaos—this was all foreseeable” (Fallows 2006, p. 80, SIGIR 2009, p. 35, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 101, Ricks 2006, p. 79).

Liberation, Not Occupation?

Advisors outside OSD and CENTCOM noted additional sources of uncertainty regarding the administration’s expectations to quickly transfer authority to Iraqis and drawdown US forces. Powell warned the President in August 2002, “when you hit this thing [Iraq], it’s like a crystal glass … It’s going to shatter. There will be no government. There will be civil disorder. You break it, you own it. You’re going to own it … You’ll have 25 million Iraqis standing around looking at each other” (SIGIR 2009, p. 3, Woodward 2004, p. 149). Even this forthright statement left Powell dissatisfied, feeling he’d failed to adequately make his point and force the President to update his beliefs. Powell again broached the matter when Bush informed him war was likely in January, asking “you understand the consequences?” (Woodward 2004, p. 269).

Others within State were concerned about the lack of a Karzai equivalent for Iraq, an exile who could quickly rally support to reconcile sectarian differences. Armitage dismissed Feith’s plan for a rapid transfer to an Interim Iraqi Authority, instead endorsing a multi-year Transitional Civil Authority to stabilize Iraq (SIGIR 2009, p. 8, Feith 2008, p. 277-278). A Future of Iraq group concluded that Iraq does not offer a strong basis for constructing new state institutions (Transparency and Anti-Corruption Measures Working Group 2003, p. 73).

Intelligence products were also circumspect about the certainty expressed by the liberation contingent within the administration. A CIA study of postwar governance in Germany and Japan after WWII concluded that multiyear occupations only started the process. It took a “generational change” to cement the gains. Iraq would necessitate a “large, extended US military presence” (The Postwar Occupations of Germany and Japan: Implications for Iraq 2002, p. 3). The aforementioned ICA concluded that establishing democracy “would
be a long, difficult turbulent process . . . bereft of the social underpinnings that directly support development of broad-based participatory democracy” (Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq 2007, p. 6).

Intelligence on Iraqi opinions toward the US was scarce, which should foster uncertain estimates. Former NSA Scowcroft, warned in an August 2002 op-ed in the Wall Street Journal of the need for an extended and high footprint occupation. Senator Biden worried that US forces might be there a decade after the start of war. And General Patraeus, when informed about the plans to invade Iraq, asked “Tell me, how does this end?” (Ricks 2006, p. 47, Woodward 2004, p. 81, Scowcroft 2002, Future of Iraq 2003, p. 5). On reconstruction, the prewar ICA on post-Saddam challenges estimated that only 50% of the population had regular access to electricity and potable water, which postwar “civil strife” would exacerbate as equipment would be “damaged, seized or looted” (Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq 2007, p. 12). In sum, the high-certainty estimate regarding the postwar power transition was unwarranted, at least according to many other advisors and outside observers.

Preferences and Pessimism

Uncertainty is distinct from pessimism. Moreover, it is not indicative of policy preferences or an outgrowth of policy preferences. State Department officials, though expressing greater uncertainty over salient political attributes, never adopted anti-war postures. Armitage readily admits that “Powell and I did not object to the prospect of taking out Saddam Hussein, but we had real questions about the timing.” To Feith, “Officials from State (as from all the agencies) warned that war could cause instability and other problems. But that was not the same as contending that Saddam should be left in power.” Rather, Powell and State “blew an uncertain trumpet” (Feith 2008, p. 246-249).

State’s greater uncertainty does not imply that OSD and CENTCOM estimates were overoptimistic. They were clearly optimistic ex post. However, that is an irrelevant benchmark that is tautological to any informational account of war’s occurrence. Rather, we must
consider whether the estimates were overoptimistic ex ante—that is based on information available before the war. Multiple accounts suggest no. To the RAND study, “Although the prevailing assumptions proved to be wrong, they were not unreasonable—or at least they were no less reasonable than a variety of other, less optimistic sets of assumptions. The problem was that the prevailing assumptions were never seriously challenged” (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 236). OSD assumptions were “no less reasonable” than any other assumptions. The fault lay in the lack of planning should the assumptions prove false (Bensahel 2007, p. 131). A CIA study of postwar Iraq expected that much of “Iraq’s elaborate and pervasive bureaucracy is likely to survive any military action,” much as OSD estimated (The Postwar Occupations of Germany and Japan: Implications for Iraq 2002, p. 7). Some CIA officials suggested handing out American flags to Iraqi towns to wave as Coalition forces entered (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 136-137). In addition, there were more optimistic estimates and planning configurations that CENTCOM rejected. Franks reports that some wanted to scale down the invasion force to a single division—under 50,000 troops. Whether OSD and CENTCOM were overoptimistic is debatable; whether they were overprecise is not.

5.3.6 Establishing Overprecision: Ex Ante and Ex Post

OSD and CENTCOM provided high-certainty estimates over Iraq’s political characteristics, which the President embraced. This section establishes that the certainty was unwarranted, reflecting overprecision. Establishing overprecision is complex as the “true” underlying distribution for the likely payoffs to war are unobservable. To overcome this impediment, I point to (1) the more uncertain estimates that other agencies provided, (2) the general dearth of prewar information pertinent to estimating postwar conditions, and (3) the realized outcomes in Iraq which were often even worse than predicted in worst-case scenarios. The first two points establish overprecision based on ex ante conditions while the final one invokes ex post considerations.

As highlighted at length in the prior subsection, officials from numerous agencies provided assessments with greater uncertainty. On postwar stability, the functioning of Iraqi
institutions, the greeting awaiting Coalition forces, or the challenges of reconstruction, many
officials voiced greater uncertainty based on the available information. Moreover, these es-
timates were widely available to senior administration officials and the President. That
is, the aggregated assessment of postwar payoffs remained narrow despite the many voices
expressing greater uncertainty. This dynamic is consistent with estimative overprecision.

Pertinent information on conditions inside Iraq was scarce. With limited information,
estimates should convey a high degree of uncertainty. Yet this was not the case for OSD,
CENTCOM, or the President. Iraq was ill-suited for intelligence collection given limited
human intelligence (HUMINT) sources and constant regime deception (Report on Prewar
officials recognized the lack of quality information and yet still provided high-certainty es-
timates. Feith acknowledged “we knew CIA’s coverage of Iraq was spotty” and Rumsfeld,
years later, “recognized that the human intelligence that we had was modest . . . intelligence
was dealing with a very hard target with a lot of underground capability, with a master of
deception” (Feith 2008 p. 259, Woodward 2004 p. 174). CIA had no HUMINT channels
within the Iraqi military to assess likely cooperation with Coalition forces. Estimates for
postwar reconstruction challenges had to rely on satellite imagery with virtually no other
sources (Woodward 2004 p. 107, SIGIR 2009 p. 11,22, Bensahel et al. 2008 p. 33). Ex-
pectations for being greeted as liberators had no informational basis. Intelligence on Iraqi
popular attitudes toward the US was unavailable.

Contrasting estimates and limited information offer ex ante indications that high-certainty
estimates were overprecise. The possibility that realized outcomes were merely a bad “draw”
from an otherwise justifiable prior expectation complicates efforts to establish overprecision
ex post. However, if the outcomes are worse than the prevailing estimate ever anticipated,
this is suggestive of overprecision. This was the case on multiple dimensions pivotal to
estimating the expected war payoff. Reality proved worse than many Bush administration
officials ever imagined.

Postwar planning anticipated a decisive end to combat allowing for a resumption of
security stability. Instead, wide scale looting, chaos, and attacks against Coalition forces pervaded Baghdad and other population centers in the immediate wake of Saddam’s displacement (SIGIR 2009, p. 52,60). Groups took up arms, trying to fill the power vacuum while Coalition forces, according to one ORHA member, were “trying to convince Iraqis that peace was at hand, and that they were safe” (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 70). The mass looting, which Rumsfeld dismissed as “Stuff happens” exhausted the population’s goodwill toward the US presence with each day of ongoing anarchy (Ricks 2006, p. 135-136).

The chaos exceeded the worst expectations of OSD officials. Feith admits he never expected anything like the convulsions that materialized: “the crippling disorder we call the insurgency was not anticipated with any precision, by either intelligence analysts or policy officials.” Even the Parade of Horribles memo, Feith concedes, did not anticipate violence of the magnitude observed (Feith 2008, p. 275, 334). Wolfowitz similarly granted that prewar assumptions on postwar stability “turned out to underestimate the problem” (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 236). State’s Future of Iraq project came closest in noting the risks of looting and widespread violence but admittedly did not predict anything as systematic as the insurgency that unfolded.

The war plan’s light footprint contributed to these stability failures. McKiernan recognized by June 2003 that while sufficient to remove the upper reaches of the Baghdad regime, the troop numbers were insufficient for everything that came after (Ricks 2006, p. 122, Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 1). Repositioning requirements, which for instance called for the 1st Marines Expeditionary Force to conduct combat operations as far north as Tikrit before racing to reestablish stability in the south, exacerbated troop level inadequacies (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 1, 86). There were simply too few troops to halt the looting and spreading anarchy. A US Colonel in Baghdad bemoaned “I didn’t have the assets” (Ricks 2006, p. 122, 148). As critically, the administration failed to understand the form of the adversary. Within days of the invasion McKiernan suggested the “enemy we’re fighting is a bit different than the one we war-gamed against, because of these paramilitary forces” (Franks 2004, p. 508). Fedayeen attacks used unexpected tactics and were more decentralized than expected.
Prewar estimates expected to redeploy Iraqi army and police capabilities to assist in postwar stability and reconstruction. Instead, both institutions dissolved. Referring to the Iraqi Army, Patraeus said “Most of them took off their uniforms and just walked home” (Franks 2004 p. 522). The pattern of melting away was evident as early as the first day. By May, the Army was non functional, masses of conscripts simply ran away. Prewar estimates called for a US capacity to hold up to 50,000 POWs; they ended up with approximately 6,000 (Feith 2008 p. 432, Bensahel et al. 2008 p. 83). The RAND study captures the breadth and depth of unanticipated outcomes:

The evidence suggests that the United States had neither the people nor the plans in place to handle the situation that arose after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Looters took to the streets, damaging much of Iraq’s infrastructure that had remained intact throughout major combat. Iraqi police and military units were nowhere to be found, having largely dispersed during combat. U.S. military forces in Baghdad and elsewhere in the country were not prepared to respond rapidly to the initial looting and subsequent large-scale public unrest. These conditions enabled the insurgency to take root, and the Army and Marine Corps have been battling the insurgents ever since (Bensahel et al. 2008 p. xvii).

Estimates for an abbreviated US occupation and quick transfer of power—that is, liberation, not occupation—also rested on assumptions about the postwar capacity of Iraq’s political institutions and ministries. These too failed to allow for, let alone expect as a likely outcome, the reality that emerged. Iraqi ministries, which airstrikes intentionally avoided, were decimated within weeks of Saddam’s fall. Garner recounts that “not only did they [looters] take everything out of the buildings, but then they pulled all the wiring out of the buildings, they pulled all the plumbing out of the buildings, and they set it on fire. So the buildings were not useable at all. In fact, some of them probably are not structurally sound enough to ever be used—they’ll have to be torn down and rebuilt . . . . I knew that there would be looting. I think all of us knew that. But I never anticipated we would not be able to use the buildings, unless they were destroyed by the military.” General Wallace of V Corps says “When we arrived in Baghdad, everybody had gone home. The regime officials were gone . . . .what in fact happened, which was unanticipated at least in [my mind], is that when
[we] decapitated the regime, everything below it fell apart” (Bensahel et al. 2008 p. 18, 69). ORHA officials were relegated to wandering the streets of Baghdad, looking for former government officials. In a post-mortem study, Representative Nita Lowey (D-NY) distilled the harsh reality that defied prevailing assessments: “the entire postwar experience appears to have taken us by surprise. We were told that we would be welcomed with open arms by the Iraqi people and that Iraqi government institutions would be restored after a short hiatus. The vision of postwar reconstruction presented to Congress at that time was for many of us either hopelessly naive or grossly incompetent” (SIGIR 2009 p. 94).

Infrastructure reconstruction was more onerous than the administration anticipated. Much of the prewar planning focused on worst-case humanitarian outcomes but best-case reconstruction ones, despite the aforementioned absence of intelligence on the latter (SIGIR 2009 p. 31). Electricity was down 50% from the prior year as looting and the unanticipated dereliction of prewar maintenance rendered the electrical grid far worse than estimated. General Strock from the Army Corps of Engineers captured the situation on the ground, “we sort of made the assumption that the country was functioning beforehand. I had a dramatic underestimation of the contrition of the Iraqi infrastructure, which turned out to be one of the our biggest problems, and not the war damage” (Gordon and Trainor 2006 p. 150).

The Bush administration held overprecise beliefs about the expected payoff to war. By emphasizing overprecision, my account highlights, rather than negates, the importance of asymmetric information. Overprecision only arises in the face of uncertainty stemming from informational asymmetries. As in typical bargaining models, incomplete information about the adversary contributes to the bargaining failure. Officials’ inability to grasp the extent of how incomplete their information really is exacerbates these dynamics. This differs from alternative accounts of the war arguing that ample information existed to suggest US payoffs to war were less attractive than ultimately estimated (Rapport 2012). Such arguments are too quick to dismiss informational asymmetries as the presence of information suggesting war payoffs are unattractive is not equivalent to eliminating uncertainty over those payoffs.
My account highlights how officials (mis)perceived the extent of that uncertainty.

5.3.7 Linking Overprecision to Bargaining Failure

Overprecise estimates about the payoff to war cause states to adopt demanding bargaining postures. Did the Bush administration’s overprecision affect bargaining dynamics? The Bay of Pigs case notes the difficulty of definitively linking overprecision to bargaining demands. This is a recurring difficulty for assessing bargaining models. Evidence linking observed bargaining postures to specific parameter values, at least as decision makers perceived them, is suggestive at best. However, we can observe the extent of bargaining demands. Preceding the Iraq War, US proposals were undoubtedly onerous. The US, through the UN, called for Iraq to relinquish a great deal of sovereignty by allowing weapons inspections, all while maintaining sanctions, no fly zones, and intermittently striking Iraqi military assets. Following failures at the UN, Bush explicitly assumed a demanding posture: Saddam and his sons had to abdicate power and leave Iraq.

Calling for a leader’s removal is one of the steepest demands states can make in international politics. While difficult to link the overprecise estimates to this demand, we can flip the consideration. Would the US ever demand something as severe as a leader’s removal from power if it didn’t have a high certainty estimate of the expected payoff to fighting?\(^\text{10}\)

Expected conflict outcomes shape the scope of bargains. Seeking bargains so favorable to itself, it follows, at least in a functionalist sense, that the US must have projected advantageous postwar outcomes with high certainty. Recall, a more uncertain estimate leads states to balance a risk-reward tradeoff. However, as certainty around the payoffs to the risky path (war) increases, states adopt stiffer postures. Though lacking a smoking gun, behavior preceding the war comports with the theory’s expectations.

\(^\text{10}\) Lake (2010, p. 40) employs a similar thought experiment linking beliefs to bargaining demands.
5.4 Why Diplomats were Marginalized

Overprecision is most probable when those with expertise regarding an adversary’s political characteristics have limited input in estimative processes. State Department officials are those most likely to have such expertise. This section provides evidence that prewar debates marginalized these officials and offers explanations as to why. Importantly, they were not excluded because they advocated anti-war positions or because the President had already decided to use force. A critique of the theory suggests that State officials are excluded when diplomacy is off the table. This critique does not hold for the Iraq case. Rather, the State Department had little role due to its own deference over important matters, the failure of the Future of Iraq project to provide operational plans, and Rice’s failure to facilitate interagency coordination.

First, State Department officials, and those from other agencies, played little role in shaping the President’s estimates for postwar Iraq. OSD and CENTCOM dominated these debates. Powell was largely “frozen out by the White House” and Feith’s designs for postwar governance did not invite State Department input (Woodward 2004, p. 79, DeYoung 2006, p. 362). The fact that DoD acquired complete control over postwar planning is revealing in itself. A RAND study concluded that the “State Department as a whole remained on the margins of the postwar planning process” (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. 30, Ricks 2006, p. 11). On curtailing information flow more generally, an unnamed four-star general argues:

There was a conscious cutting off of advice and concerns, so that the guy who ultimately had to make the decision, the President, didn’t get the advice. Well before the troops crossed the line of departure concern was raised about what would happen in the postwar period, how you would deal with this decapitated country. It was blown off. Concern about a long-term occupation—that was discounted. The people around the President were so, frankly, intellectual arrogant … They were making simplistic assumptions and refused to put them to the test (Ricks 2006, p. 99).

State officials were “conspicuously absent” from ORHA. Garner only learned of the Future of Iraq project at the Rock Drill exercise in late February, after being on the job for six
weeks. He subsequently tried to tap State Department expertise and bring Tom Warrick and Meghan O’Sullivan into ORHA. Rumsfeld intervened, objecting to both and ultimately prevailing in getting Warrick excluded despite Powell’s protest. DoD generally ignored the Future of Iraq project, deeming it too intellectual and not operationally helpful. State’s Ryan Crocker said, “I never felt the Future of Iraq Project was embraced or connected to the actual planning effort” (SIGIR 2009 p. 16, 37, 43, 45, Ricks 2006 p. 80).

More broadly, State-Defense relations were toxic for much of this period. A senior financial officer at Defense suggested the two “were at war” while Franks wished “Don Rumsfeld and Colin Powell had forced” the two agencies to collaborate more closely (Ricks 2006 p. 103, DeYoung 2006 p. 434, Bensahel et al. 2008 p. xx). Feith viewed it as a minor victory when Under Secretary of State Grossman “was willing to repair relations with me to the point that he no longer stormed out of meetings when I spoke” (Feith 2008 p. 388).

Why were diplomats marginalized during the prewar planning process? If the President had already decided to use force then excluding State Department assessments and their associated uncertainty was immaterial to the Iraq War. I argue this was not the case. The President pursued time-consuming and ultimately costly diplomatic avenues through the United Nations. Moreover, State Department officials were not anti-war. Rather, these officials and their assessments had little sway for alternative reasons.

State’s marginalization was partly self-imposed. Senior officials were deferential throughout prewar deliberations. State Department officials were frequently quiet during interagency debates in front of the President (Feith 2008 p. 273). Powell’s biographer references his respect for the chain of command and consequent deference to the President. Officials working below Powell regretted that he never used his full clout (DeYoung 2006 p. 396, 469). Powell recognized this himself, worrying that his attempt to elucidate the potential difficulties with managing post-Saddam Iraq failed to make an impression on the President. State’s paucity of resources compared to Defense contributed to this deference. Powell conceded that DoD should run postwar planning: “State does not have the personnel, the capacity, or the size to deal with an immediate postwar situation in a foreign country that’s eight thousand miles
away from here” (SIGIR 2009, p. 33, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 149). State’s major postwar effort, the Future of Iraq, gained little traction in interagency debates for multiple reasons. Neither Powell nor Armitage championed the project (DeYoung 2006, p. 398). A lack of actionable information or operational guidance further reduced its traction. The breadth and length, at over 1,000 pages, made it difficult to digest when Warrick briefed others on its conclusions (SIGIR 2009, p. 15).

Interagency coordination failures exacerbated State’s marginalization. Rice failed to set the terms of discussion or mediate the hostility between the Pentagon and State Department, playing a far quieter role as NSA compared to a Kissinger or Brzezinski. Powell told the President the national security decision-making process was broken while Armitage described it as “dysfunctional” to Rice (Bensahel et al. 2008, p. xix-xx, Feith 2008, p. 250, Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 39, 147, DeYoung 2006, p. 477). Rice herself felt “clearly we didn’t have the structure” for interagency debate. In sum, idiosyncrasies of the interagency process, the personalities occupying diplomatic positions of power, and the nature of State’s primary assessment product (the Future of Iraq) served to limit State Department influence.

5.5 Alternative Explanations

This chapter contends that overprecise estimates about Iraq’s political attributes affected US beliefs about its payoff to war. Unable to secure an equally attractive outcome through negotiations, the US abandoned diplomacy and initiated the Iraq War. There is considerable evidence consistent with these theoretical implications. Nonetheless, there are a range of plausible alternative explanations and critiques of the argument. Though my theory is consistent with the case, it cannot offer a comprehensive explanation for the bargaining dynamics. This section begins with a discussion, and refutation where appropriate, of critiques against this chapter’s contentions. Next, I situate this account for the Iraq War within the limited but growing literature on strategic dynamics that contributed to the bargaining failure, with a focus on commitment problems arising from Iraq’s suspected weapons
programs.

To begin, were the OSD, CENTCOM, and the President’s estimates consistent with a strictly rational Bayesian framework? In this alternative account, Bush administration officials held beliefs that reflected the evidence available to them and the perceived quality of that evidence. Whether individuals alter their beliefs in the face of new evidence depends on what they perceive that evidence to be evidence of (Gerber and Green 1999; Bullock 2009). Likelihood functions in Bayes’ formula can differ depending on the perceived quality of the evidence and its source.

This alternative account suffers on multiple fronts compared to one allowing for estimative errors. First, OSD and CENTCOM held narrow prior beliefs that precluded a range of plausible outcomes, including the realized ones. Rumsfeld’s commitment to liberation, not occupation bordered on dogma, failing to recognize the lengthy history of extended and difficult postwar processes. Beliefs that combat would end decisively, yielding post-Saddam stability, similarly precluded alternative outcomes. Second, these officials did not update their beliefs when presented with information meriting revised, more uncertain, assessments. State Department officials, the collective wisdom of the US intelligence community, Senators, and some DoD officials all indicated that available information was insufficient to justify the prevailing estimative certainty. Officials don’t typically discount assessments from these sources. They are credible major bodies of the national security apparatus. One account describes Wolfowitz as “impervious to evidence,” a description that equally applies to Feith and Rumsfeld (Ricks 2006, p. 31). Such behavior is incompatible with a strictly rational updating process barring a strong argument as to why evidence from the aforementioned sources is incredible. Third, officials guilty of overprecision marginalized and precluded additional information flow. Bayesian accounts predict that officials would seek cheap available information, not curtail it. Again, the rational account relies on the incredibility of the various dissenting, or at least more uncertain, voices. Fourth, as discussed earlier, realized outcomes were worse than many of the prevailing worst case estimates. To Fallows (2006, p. 4), the “central intellectual failure of the people who planned the invasion of Iraq
was their inability or unwillingness to imagine where this decision might lead.” This is incompatible with rationalist accounts in which beliefs must place positive probability on any realizable outcome (Harsanyi 1967). In sum, reconciling prevailing estimates with rationalist frameworks requires heroic assumptions about source incredibility and individual likelihood functions.

OSD beliefs over postwar Iraq are also pertinent for evaluating the role of preference divergence among bureaucracies as a contributing factor to the war. Consider a simple critique: OSD officials preferred war to peace either because it would grant parochial bureaucratic rewards or because they placed a different (higher) value on the reputational benefits to removing Saddam. Preference-based arguments are tricky to refute, as discussed in Chapter 4. Insofar as preferences over some aspect of the process were clear—e.g., “liberation, not occupation”—I suggest these shaped beliefs affecting final payoffs, rather than directly constituting part of the final payoff. Put differently, I contend US officials from all agencies, if holding identical information and beliefs, would have had identical rank orderings of possible outcomes. But of course they did not hold identical beliefs. If their evaluations of the relative value of war versus peace diverged, I posit the divergence stemmed from heterogenous beliefs rather than heterogenous preferences. Moreover, if “where you stand depends on where you sit” we would imagine (or at least hope) the executive is cognizant of this dynamic in which OSD estimates that motivate harsher diplomatic demands are down-weighted. I’ve illustrated the opposite was the case. If Bush himself simply had a preference for war then strategic communication, as well as much of the political science on the Iraq War, is moot. Such a preference, while possible, is difficult to reconcile with the time-consuming and diplomatically costly search for the UNSC’s endorsement.

This chapter prioritizes US estimates about Iraqi political, rather than military, attributes. I believe this emphasis is well-placed as US estimates of Iraqi military capabilities were largely accurate and when they were not they were generally pessimistic which should facilitate bargaining. Twelve years of sanctions, no fly zones, and airstrikes decimated Iraqi military assets. This was common knowledge to both sides. Iraq's existing WMD stockpiles
were the principle source of US uncertainty over Iraq’s military capabilities. The prevailing US belief was that Saddam had chemical and biological weapons which he could deploy on the battlefield (CIA Iraq’s Continuing Weapons Program, Franks 2004). US inaccuracies regarding Iraqi military capabilities were skewed in the direction of assuming Iraq had greater capabilities than they actually did. If anything, this should have strengthened Saddam’s bargaining leverage and reduced US demands. Consequently, asymmetric information over Iraq’s military attributes was a force for peace, not war.

What about Iraq’s role in the strategic interaction? This chapter is slanted toward the US perspective, minimizing Iraqi agency. An adversary, like Iraq, is incentivized to signal that US estimates are overprecise to obtain more favorable bargaining proposals. However, this incentive reduces the credibility of any such signal. Moreover, it is unclear what signal Saddam could have sent to disabuse Bush administration officials of their certainty over postwar stability and prospects for a quick governance handover. Saddam could plausibly emphasize societal cleavages, the Fedayeen’s aptitude to adopt insurgent tactics, and his infrastructure’s degradation in an effort to induce more US uncertainty. But none of these signals are sufficiently costly to persuade US officials given that they recognize Saddam’s incentive to send them.

My account prioritizes US beliefs about Iraq, neglecting Iraqi beliefs about the US. However, Iraqi (un)certainty about US attributes may have contributed to the bargaining failure. Saddam apparently doubted the US commitment to invade. If it did invade, Saddam believed the US would not endure the casualties necessary to assault Baghdad and displace him. US casualty sensitivity and withdrawals in Lebanon, Somalia, as well as the decisions to stop short of regime change in the Gulf War and following Desert Fox, contributed to Saddam’s beliefs (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 66, Lake 2010, p. 32). According to postwar interviews with Tariq Aziz, Saddam “thought they [the US] would not fight a ground war because it would be too costly to the Americans. He was overconfident.” Despite the costly build up of military forces and consequent changes to the battlefield calculus (Fearon 1997b, Slantchev 2011), Saddam expected US operations would be limited to airstrikes and perhaps
incursions into the south. A lack of multilateral blessing for the US war contributed to his beliefs that US threats were insincere strategic misrepresentations of its resolve (Gordon and Trainor 2006, p. 121, 135).

Iraqi beliefs are plausibly consistent with a typical asymmetric information account of bargaining failure wherein Iraq believes the US is the weak type and rejects onerous demands, when the US is actually the strong, resolved type. However, Lake (2010) argues that Saddam’s optimism is better attributed to estimative errors from his bureaucratic insulation than to a standard information asymmetries. Either way, I grant that my one-sided account of estimative errors is not a comprehensive one. My theory of overprecision elucidates one component of the bargaining failure, one that is often overlooked or unexplained with extant theory, but is an incomplete explanation of war’s causes.

**WMDs and Credible Commitment**

The President’s ultimatum to Saddam stated, “We are now acting because the risks of inaction would be far greater. In one year, or five years, the power of Iraq to inflict harm on all free nations would be multiplied many times over.”[11] Bush invokes the logic of commitment problems, one of the primary rationalist explanations for war (Fearon 1995; Powell 1999, 2006). The reasoning is as follows: a power shift in Iraq’s favor will augment Saddam’s future bargaining leverage which he cannot credibly commit not to use. Rather than suffer less attractive bargains in the future, the US attacks preventively.

This chapter purposefully sets aside the issue of WMDs and the associated threat of shifting power to instead highlight overprecise estimates concerning the payoff to war. This choice reduces the completeness of my account of the bargaining failure. Other accounts emphasize the shifting power and credible commitment dynamics. In these, a potential weapons program coupled with either imperfect observability of its existence (Debs and Monteiro 2014) or the costs of containing its progress (Coe 2011) are the primary causes of war. I do not dispute the importance of WMDs in shaping the strategic environment.

and choices that follow. However, I do want to emphasize the incompleteness of strictly rational accounts relying upon power shifts to explain the war. As with all bargaining failures, expected war payoffs are critical to generating intractable commitment problems. The magnitude of the power shift and the costs of fighting a preventive war are key parameters in dictating whether a preventive war occurs. Actor beliefs over each parameter dictate strategic choices and when these beliefs are inconsistent with standard rationalist expectations, as I have argued, explaining their formation and persistence takes on added importance.

Consider the size of the purported power shift. Bargaining models typically conceive of this as the change in the expected prospects for military victory. As argued earlier, we can equivalently reframe this as the change in the expected postwar political settlement. Imposing one’s preferred policy is the objective; battlefield success is only a step toward doing so. If beliefs about the pre-shift political settlement are ill-founded, then the perceived magnitude of the power shift (or at least the certainty attributed to that magnitude), will similarly be ill-founded. Others argue the power shift confronting the US was of sufficient magnitude, conditional on other parameters, to induce an intractable commitment problem. However, beliefs about the shift’s magnitude suffered from estimative errors. This chapter sheds light on the importance of this factor and the role it played in undermining diplomacy. A similar argument applies to the expected costs of imposing a preferred policy outcome. Past accounts rightly emphasize the costs of preventive war, whether relative to the magnitude of the power shift or the costs of containment. This emphasis merely highlights the importance of understanding beliefs about those costs. Thus, while this chapter provides an admittedly incomplete account of all prewar bargaining considerations, it elucidates sources of estimative errors over parameters that are central to any strategic explanation of the war.

12 See [Lake, 2010] on some of the conceptual difficulties of incorporating uncertainty over an actor’s own costs of fighting with specific reference to postwar governance costs.

13 A more complete account might incorporate commitment problems alongside asymmetric information over war payoffs with the possibility for overprecision. [Wolford, Reiter, and Carrubba, 2011] develop a model incorporating commitment problems and asymmetric information. While a full account is beyond the scope of this chapter, overprecision over war’s payoff could induce an equilibrium change from a pooling
5.6 Conclusion

This chapter stresses that assessments of the political conditions in postwar Iraq shaped US expectations for the payoff to war. Conflict is instrumental toward achieving policy objectives. Estimating how efficacious it is as an instrument is thus pivotal. Driven by OSD and CENTCOM assessments, the President adopted a high-certainty estimate over the ability of the US to install its preferred policies and the costs it must bear to do so. Expectations of a decisive end to combat, competent Iraqi institutions and ministries, a welcoming environment amenable to rapid power transfers, and functional infrastructure all contributed to the overprecise estimate. Many, particularly those at State, deemed the available information insufficient to justify the prevailing certainty. Nonetheless, Bush adopted onerous bargaining demands consistent with a high-certainty estimate of what could be procured through force. All of this conforms with the theoretical pathway posited in Chapter 2.

Similar to the Bay of Pigs case, the Iraq War case offers inductive insights into unspecified elements of the theory. Again, errors due to a flawed information solicitation process that marginalized advisers were compounded by overprecision at the level of the advisers who were granted priority. As in 1961, the aggregation process suffered from selective exposure and correlation neglect, but also (in the Iraq case) from selective perception. Powell stressed the potential chaos that might follow Saddam’s fall. A joint Intelligence Community Assessment distributed to many decision makers warned of postwar instability. Yet neither gained purchase in the aggregated executive-level assessment.

The Iraq War illustrates that bureaucracies are more than another layer at which political contestation may occur. A division of labor in conducting foreign and security policy insures that the constituent agencies hold diverse non-overlapping expertise and are tapped into different information sources. Both elements were evident in the State Department’s Future of Iraq study which drew upon exiled Iraqis and emphasized postwar elements that fell under peaceful outcome to their “screening for war” outcome that risks bargaining failure.
State's substantive purview (as opposed to the Phase I-III considerations that dominated efforts at DoD and CENTCOM).

The informational environment surrounding a strategic interaction does not dictate executive-level assessments. Instead they arise from potentially flawed processes and/or flawed evaluations. Given that choices are contingent on beliefs, understanding the content and development of these beliefs is a necessary component of any strategic account of conflict. As with Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs, Bush bears responsibility for the estimative failure. Alternative interagency processes that guarded against curtailing or down-weighting input from diverse sources would be an obvious improvement over what transpired. I offer this straightforward prescription while readily granting the difficulty of managing the interagency process and forming strategic assessments when confronting ambiguous information and signals in international politics.
Assessment certainty is a double-edged sword. Certainty promotes peace when that certainty is warranted given the available information. Certain of how far we can push our adversaries at the bargaining table, we know to push them no further given the inefficiency of bargaining failure and the resulting costly military conflict. However, estimative certainty is often an imperfect reflection of the information environment. Leaders and their advisers, and humans more generally, often are more certain than the available information warrants. Those charged with making strategic assessments that then dictate strategic choices are far from infallible. When certainty stems from these errors of overprecision, it is no longer strictly associated with peace and can increase the likelihood of war. Greater apparent certainty of what can be secured through force leads overconfident leaders to place more onerous bargaining demands on the adversary. Harsher demands increase the chance such demands are rejected. A theory incorporating empirically well-established perceptual errors reveals a conditional relationship between certainty and war.

To provide testable implications I theorize the conditions generating the conditionality. Perceptual errors can explain inefficiencies generally but not with any specificity absent a theory of when these errors occur. Overprecision in assessments of adversary characteristics occur when leaders marginalize information pertinent to an adversary’s political attributes. Executives confronting situations where force is a plausible outside option are typically careful to solicit information on an opponent’s military characteristics. However, they fluctuate in their solicitation of information pertinent for evaluating the opponent’s political characteristics that affect expected payoffs to war. This includes an opponent’s resolve over the
issue at stake, domestic unity which affects the force an opponent can bring to bear, and the ease with which military victory can translate to securing the political objectives which constitute the disputed stakes. Overall assessments are likely overprecise when they down-weight these considerations and the uncertainty attendant to them. For providing testable hypotheses, I use the extent of State Department influence in the assessment process to operationalize marginalization of political considerations. I contend what you consider depends on where you sit. When those tasked with international diplomacy and implementing foreign policy are incorporated into the estimative process, those estimates offer an accurate representation of the prevailing uncertainty. Consistent with extant rationalist accounts, certainty produces peace. In the converse conditions, certainty likely stems from overprecision and can increase the likelihood of war.

Chapter 3 quantitatively tests implications of the theory. I turn to US crises during the Cold War and declassified security documents to construct an original corpus and measure of estimative certainty at the locus of foreign policy decision making. Analysis of certainty at the level of the bureaucracy corroborates a key theoretical contention. Conditional on the crisis, State Department officials provided more uncertain estimates than those from other agencies. More importantly, the extent of State Department input in memos to or meetings with the president conditions the link between certainty and war. With sufficient State Department input, high certainty is associated with peace. This accords with typical bargaining models in which actors informed of each other’s reservation values, or war payoffs, successfully identify mutually preferable diplomatic solutions. However, when State Department input is limited, assessment certainty is no longer linked to peace. Consistent with the theory, estimates lacking diplomats’ involvement are prone to overprecision in which case certainty is ill-founded. When sufficiently overprecise in their estimates, leaders make more onerous bargaining demands, elevating the risk of bargaining failure. Results are robust to numerous alternative specifications and concerns, such as selection over the extent of diplomatic involvement and the possibility of preference divergence across bureaucracies. The data is consistent with diplomats providing uncertainty, not pessimism or mere dovishness.
A case study of the Bay of Pigs in Chapter 4 serves multiple purposes. First, it offers an illustrative example of the theory in practice. Second, it offers a means for testing steps in the causal chain that elude quantitative verifications. Third, the case offers inductive insights into elements of the theory that are left unspecified in Chapter 2. Fourth, granular historical analysis provides a refutation of numerous alternative explanations or critiques of the main argument. And fifth, the theory offers a new lens through which to examine the Bay of Pigs, shining a light on Kennedy’s assessment of popular uprisings in Cuba, a facet of the decision-making process that historical accounts often diminish. In brief, the case demonstrates that (1) Cuba’s political attributes—specifically Castro’s consolidation of power and the linked likelihood of popular uprisings—were important for estimating war payoffs, (2) CIA and Kennedy formed high-certainty estimates over these attributes, (3) State Department officials, and others, voiced caution and greater uncertainty, (4) US bargaining demands—diminished Communist influence and swift compensation—were onerous, and (5) State Department personnel had little input for much of the assessment process. The case further reveals that overprecision arose from a deficient interagency information solicitation process handicapped by a need for secrecy (generating selective exposure and correlational neglect) coupled with the already overprecise estimates CIA offered based on its human intelligence from sources inside Cuba. State’s marginalization was not driven by a pre-existing preference for attack, but rather due to the closely held nature of the operation and Rusk’s own retiring nature. Cuba’s political characteristics dictated what could be secured through force and unfortunately those with the relevant expertise to evaluate such characteristics were given limited ability to do so. Facing a tough “type,” overprecision had bloody consequences.

Chapter 5’s study of the Iraq War further illustrates the theory while highlighting (1) its continuing relevance outside the temporal bounds of Chapter 3’s quantitative tests and (2) the importance of translating military gains into political objectives. Political characteristics were again pivotal for war payoffs, but the form of political characteristic differed from the prior case. To recap, the chapter demonstrates that (1) estimates about the immediate
postwar security environment influenced expected war payoffs, (2) the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and in turn the President, held highly certain estimates—e.g., for postwar stability, liberation rather than occupation, efficacy of Iraqi institutions and ministries, (3) State Department officials, and many others, voiced greater uncertainty noting a dearth of quality intelligence, (4) Bush made steep bargaining demands on Saddam, first demanding widespread inspections and disclosures and later Saddam’s forfeiture of power, and (5) State Department officials, though granted limited audience with the President, were marginalized or ignored in the estimative process. In this case, selective exposure and the correlational neglect it induces was compounded by selective perception (or limited updating in response to State’s input, either from the Secretary or the Future of Iraq project). These processes are fundamentally irreconcilable with rationalist Bayesian expectations. Again, State Department’s limited input didn’t derive from pre-existing preferences for war but rather from a broken interagency process coupled with State’s own deference, which offers further inductive insights as to why officials might marginalize diplomats. Admittedly, the study does not address Iraq’s WMD programs and the commitment problems they generated. Regardless, preventive war hinges on an actor’s beliefs over salient parameters, which is precisely what this chapter explicates. Contingency on these estimates only highlights the importance of understanding their origin.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

Findings in this project have multiple implications for scholars of international politics and conflict. Most broadly, it provides a glimpse into the benefits of incorporating behavioral insights into rationalist accounts of war. Decades of successfully replicated studies illustrate systematic deviations in human information processing versus the rationalist benchmark. These results merit reflection rather than dismissal from IR scholars, who ought to take the possibility that leaders exhibit similar tendencies seriously. Difficulties specifying behavioral insights in a disciplined fashion and simultaneously theorizing conditions most amenable to
their occurrence often handicap this fruitful synthesis. This project offers an example of how to overcome some of these impediments. Overprecision is well-defined and incorporated into a bargaining model in a systematic way. Rather than add confusion or muddle, I hope doing so offers new explanatory insights while retaining a semblance of parsimony.

Of course a focus on belief formation unbound from the strictures of rationalist contentions is not wholly new (Jervis 1976; George 1980; Khong 1992; Press 2005; Brooks 2008; Saunders 2011; Yarhi-Milo 2014). Perhaps more original is incorporating these beliefs into a strategic framework. Put differently, the rationalist benchmark benefits from taking behavioral insights into belief formation seriously while studies of belief formation similarly benefit by then incorporating those beliefs into a structured framework to illustrate the consequences of those beliefs in a strategic situation. As the quantitative results in Chapter 3 show, the rationalist model is quite powerful as an explanatory benchmark, able to account for the direction of the unconditional relationship between certainty and war. A single new variable, overprecision, coupled with its generative conditions, however, improves our ability to explain variation in the quantitative results and provides insights into high-consequence failures that are otherwise difficult to explain. Some may bemoan resorting to psychological pathologies to explain conflict. Though surely easier to generate inefficient outcomes when invoking estimative deficiencies, the utility of doing so is evident in the gained explanatory power.

Certainty is not the welfare-enhancing panacea it sometimes appears to be. For most models of conflict or escalating hostility—such as the security dilemma or standard bargaining theory—certainty over an opponent’s attributes helps agents reach pareto optimal outcomes. This project contributes to a wave of work offering refinements to this typical intuition (Bas and Schub forthcoming; Fey N.d.b; Arena and Wolford 2012).

Though seemingly at odds with the prior takeaway, the dissertation also reveals the dangers of asymmetric information in crisis bargaining. The difference stems from whether the certainty is as perceived by the agent (as in the prior paragraph) or the certainty is warranted given the informational environment. Their combination reveals a new danger
to asymmetric information. Not only can it produce war through the standard risk-return tradeoff but also through decision-makers’ failure to recognize the extent of asymmetry. That is, overprecision is a problem of asymmetric information. It is incompleteness in the information environment that demands assessments from leaders, which generate the possibility of overprecision at all. There would be no overprecision in the absence of incomplete information. Other substantive domains in political science may benefit from adopting a similar approach if they entail actors with conflicting preferences bargaining in the presence of asymmetric information. To the extent scholars can specify conditions conducive to perceptual errors, the framework may offer new insights and testable implications.

Substantively, the theory and case studies disentangle and highlight sources of uncertainty that are often neglected or left implicit. An adversary’s political dimensions, beyond its resolve or civil-military functionality, affect expected payoffs to conflict. Securing popular support against an adversary’s regime influences the probability that military action is successful, as it did for the Bay of Pigs. Theoretical accounts of bargaining and conflict either ignore this consideration or leave it bundled in the \( p \) parameter. Similarly, the ease with which an victor can secure its political objectives, once achieving its military ones, dictates the expected war payoff. Bargaining accounts typically model a seamless transition between the two while reality, for instance in Iraq, suggests these considerations are a source of uncertainty that merit careful theorizing.

Incorporating perceptual errors has implications for the proper level of analysis in strategic interactions. Leaders, not states, solicit and marshall information to form assessments and beliefs. A resurgence in studying leaders is most welcome. Yet the sources of their information has received scant attention. If information and the resulting uncertainty are consequential for crisis-bargaining outcomes then surely the form and sources of that information merits study. This is where bureaucracies and senior advisers are pivotal. Bureaucracies, to the extent they have any agency, are not merely jockeying for influence to advance parochial interests. They are not just another layer at which political contestation occurs. Rather, a division of labor in crafting foreign and security policy dictates that
bureaucracies become repositories of specialized information and expertise. As a result, their influence shapes the type and content of information that leaders receive. This project posits and demonstrates that bureaucracies and the senior advisers who lead them offer non-overlapping informational inputs to leaders. Consequently, a leader who fails to marshall the full resources of the pertinent bureaucracies will form incomplete and distorted beliefs. My account thus brings these advisers to the forefront while offering a non-preference-based theory of bureaucratic politics in international relations.

Looking to the future, the project suggests some paths for subsequent research. As with all scholarship, the causal chain must stop somewhere. Future work ought to systematically theorize the conditions most amenable to marginalization. More concretely, why is State Department influence often limited? Case studies offer inductive insights into this process, suggesting the most obvious selection story is frequently incorrect. Much work remains, perhaps theorizing the demands for consistency or certainty at the executive level. While stressing a melding of psychological results with rationalist insights, my account is admittedly light on the psychological roots and determinants of overprecision. This is in part due to the limited insights that psychologists currently have on the matter but also because I’ve curtailed the causal chain.

How generalizable are the findings to other times and places? The US, particularly in the data’s temporal span, enjoyed a privileged position that is almost unique in the modern state system. Fortuitous geography reduces the importance of defense in US security, making nearly every US use of force discretionary and offensive. Extrapolating findings from the US context requires caution on at least two fronts. First, are decision-making processes in other states similarly susceptible to perceptual and overprecision errors? There is reason to believe that such errors are even more pronounced in non-democratic settings. Reiter and Stam (2002, p. 23) theorize that democracies typically make better estimates than autocracies partially due to a functioning marketplace of ideas. Second, are diplomats in other states similarly disposed to recognize more uncertainty? I anticipate diplomats have similar dispositions and effects in other countries due to their institutional mandate.
and expertise about opponent political attributes. This result would attenuate in states
where other bureaucracies are equally attendant to the importance of political attributes and
the uncertainty they introduce into estimates of a conflict’s expected outcome. Additional
research could fruitfully test these suppositions.

Intra-crisis signaling and learning are absent from this project. For tractability, I assume
information is smoothly incorporated and aggregated over time but make limited efforts to
verify this. This abstracts away the process of how leaders learn and how group decision-
making dynamics affect information provision and aggregation. Similarly, the project only
hints at intra and inter-administration learning, offering a pessimistic account. However, as
noted in the Bay of Pigs case, there is evidence of post-failure updating to the bureaucratic
process which, by my account, affects overall estimative efforts. Furthermore, advances in
analyzing text as data offer paths forward for studying group decision-making processes.
For instance, does speaker order matter in a group setting by, say, shifting the agenda? How
does group experience, either time together or the individuals’ time in elite positions, alter
the form of advice they offer? Highlighting the importance of elites in shaping a leader’s
information environment necessarily raises more questions about their role and behavior.

6.2 Policy Implications

As a predictive matter this research identifies circumstances prone to estimative error
and foreign policy blunders. High assessment certainty coupled with limited reflection on
an adversary’s political characteristics that affect war payoffs is a dangerous combination.
Crucially, these political characteristics are more diverse and multidimensional than typ-
ically appreciated. Failures of reflection and perhaps imagination over these dimensions
contributed to some of the most devastating US foreign policy decisions of the past half-
century. More concretely, the cases reveal two substantive conditions prone to overprecision.
First, closely held or secretive deliberations about using force are problematic. They nec-
essarily limit the range of informational inputs to a leader which is precisely what drives
overprecision when bureaucracies each have informational comparative advantages. Second, human intelligence (HUMINT) is subject to the source’s bias. This is an obvious point yet one frequently neglected, at least in the contexts of the Bay of Pigs and Iraq War. Sources have agendas—such as securing US support against Castro—that skews their messages. Over-reliance on these messages despite this skew at the expense of alternative information sources can produce correlational neglect and overprecision in estimative processes.

Suggesting diplomats merit greater input in assessment processes is a simple but incomplete policy implication. Diplomats serve as a proxy for those with a substantive focus on and wealth of information about adversary political attributes that affect expected conflict outcomes. However, I do not preclude the possibility that others will take up this estimative challenge. It is apparent they often do so, as Sherman Kent did before the Bay of Pigs. On a less sanguine note, I also do not preclude the possibility that diplomats will abdicate this task, turning their estimative attention to alternative substantive matters. For instance, a whole-hearted endorsement of Responsibility to Protect could cause senior diplomats to focus their assessments on threats to civilians abroad rather than assessing attributes pertinent for estimating expected outcomes to using force—for example, what might follow after displacing a regime that threatens its civilians. These are not mutually exclusive assessment tasks; I merely note a potential danger of shifting the substantive focus.

Prescriptively, leaders must insure their own consistent access to all pertinent forms and sources of information. Wrangling the interagency process is easier said than done but the consequences of failure are steep. In practice, the challenge is actually more circumscribed as the military side of the estimative task is rarely lost. Executives may disagree with their military advisors but rarely exclude them from the process. It’s the political advisers who are more problematic. Their input, for whatever reason, is not guaranteed and thus an executive’s task is to solicit it. Those charged with conducting foreign policy offer a unique substantive emphasis and informational basis. Diplomats’ advisory role is key because they bring a different perspective, not because they are advocates for peace. Again, the political is occasionally lost which can generate stiffer bargaining postures and a higher risk of conflict.
Postwar translation of military gains into political outcomes cannot be taken for granted. Regime change is only a complete and coherent policy objective when leaders specify an alternative replacement regime and analyze its prospects for success. US foreign policy from at least Eisenhower through today offers ample evidence that military efforts are wasted and extreme sacrifices done a disservice when demanded in the absence of a clearly articulated objective with a firm grasp of the attendant uncertainties.

Finally, the prescriptive ideal for assessments is an accurate statement of the extent of uncertainty and a full accounting of the outcomes that uncertainty allows for (Friedman and Zeckhauser 2012). Uncertainty reduction may be a goal for intelligence collection but not for leader and elite assessment processes. Again, the limitation is not on what is knowable, but rather on recognizing what is known and what isn’t. Theoretically, recognizing greater uncertainty dictates revised bargaining postures. We may fear that rather than revision, a full accounting of uncertainty induces policy paralysis. However, paralysis may be welfare improving versus current practices as there is nothing inherently valuable about decisiveness or unattractive about the status quo when lacking well-understood counterfactuals. As Kennedy learned the hard way, “I know from experience that failure is more destructive than an appearance of indecision.”¹

¹Quoted in Freedman (2000, p. 374).
Appendix to Chapter 2

Uniform Distribution

This section sketches the comparative statics of interest using a uniform distribution (results are substantively similar for beta distributions with non-decreasing hazard rates). Let \( c_B \) be drawn from a cumulative distribution \( H(z) \). As established by Fearon (1995), in the substantively interesting range of parameter values, \( A \) maximizes \( u_A(x) \) with \( x^* \in [p, 1] \) that solves \( \frac{b(x-p)}{1-H(x-p)} = \frac{1}{x-p+c_A} \). I consider the case with \( c_B \sim U(\mu - \Delta, \mu + \Delta) \), where \( \mu \) is the mean of the distribution and \( \Delta \) represents the degree of uncertainty.

Begin with the case of warranted certainty. Substituting a uniform distribution into the general condition, solve for \( x^* \). This produces \( \frac{1}{2\Delta}(p - c_A - x) + 1 - \frac{x-p-\mu+\Delta}{2\Delta} = 0 \), which reduces to \( x^* = \frac{\Delta+2p+\mu-c_A}{2} \). There are two cases. In case (i), \( x^* \geq p + \mu - \Delta \), \( A \) demands \( \frac{\Delta+2p+\mu-c_A}{2} \) which is increasing in \( \Delta \). Note that due to the finite bounds of the distribution, \( A \) demands at least \( p + \min(c_B) \) or \( p + \mu - \Delta \). In case (ii), \( x^* < p + \mu - \Delta \) in which case \( A \) demands \( p + \mu - \Delta \), which is decreasing in \( \Delta \). Thus the relationship is non-monotonic.

Uncertainty’s relationship to the probability of war is the main concern. In the uniform case, \( \Pr(\text{War}) = H(x^* - p) \). Substituting in, \( \Pr(\text{War}) = \frac{x^*-p-|\mu-\Delta|}{2\Delta} \). In case (i) this reduces to \( \Pr(\text{War}) = \frac{3\Delta-c_A-\mu}{4\Delta} \) and thus the probability of war is increasing in uncertainty (\( \Delta \)). In case (ii) varying \( \Delta \) has no effect because the probability is fixed at zero.

Now consider the case with unwarranted certainty. Let \( \theta \) represent the unwarranted percentage uncertainty reduction and solve for \( x^* \). Repeating the above analysis produces \( \frac{1}{2(1-\theta)\Delta}(p-c_A-x) + 1 - \frac{x-p-\mu+(1-\theta)\Delta}{2(1-\theta)\Delta} = 0 \), which reduces to \( x^* = \frac{\Delta-\theta\Delta+2p+\mu-c_A}{2} \). There are two cases. In case (I) \( x^* \geq p + \mu - (1-\theta)\Delta \), \( A \) demands \( \frac{\Delta-\theta\Delta+2p+\mu-c_A}{2} \) which is decreasing.
in $\theta$. Again, with finite bounds on the distribution $A$ demands at least $p + \min(c_B)$ as $\min(c_B)$ is perceived. In case (II) $x^* < p + \mu - (1 - \theta)\Delta$, $A$ demands $p + \mu - (1 - \theta)\Delta$, which is increasing in $\theta$. The relationship is non-monotonic.

Solving for the probability of war is akin to the analysis above. $A$ demands $x^*$, which is determined based on the misperceived distribution of $c_B$ while $c_B$ is drawn from its actual full range; $\Pr(War) = H(x^* - p)$. In case (I) this reduces to $\Pr(War) = \frac{3\Delta - c_A - \mu - \theta\Delta}{4\Delta}$ which is decreasing in unwarranted certainty ($\theta$). In case (II), $\Pr(War) = \frac{p + \mu - (1 - \theta)\Delta}{2\Delta}$ which is increasing in $\theta$. Certainty, when unwarranted, can increase the probability of war.

**Beta Distribution**

The uniform distribution is somewhat distinct in that shrinking its variance (uncertainty) necessarily implies shrinking its range. To nod toward greater generalizability, I simulate results using a beta distribution and show the salient comparative statics hold. As noted above, Fearon (1995) shows $A$ maximizes $u_A(x)$ with $x^* \in [p, 1]$ that solves $\frac{h(x-p)}{1-H(x-p)} = \frac{1}{x-p+c_A}$. I simulate quantities using a rescaled beta distribution such that $c_B \in (0, 0.6)$ (rescaling avoids substantively uninteresting boundary conditions). I draw $c_B$ from a symmetric beta with a fixed mean of 0.3 and reduce the uncertainty starting from Beta(1.5,1.5) and collapsing to Beta(50,50). I set $p=0.4$ and $c_A=0.1$. Figure A.1 shows how greater certainty, from either additional quality information or from overprecision, affects the probability of conflict. As in the uniform case, the probability of conflict is declining in greater warranted certainty. And as before, the probability of conflict can increase in unwarranted certainty and declines at a strictly greater rate in warranted certainty than in unwarranted certainty.

The exercise demonstrates that the result is not an artifact of the uniform’s shrinking bounds. Additionally, it reveals that conflict is increasing in overprecision even when the proposing state $A$ does not (incorrectly) believe it is making offers that will satisfy even the most resolved type of the opponent.

---

1 These results hold for asymmetric beta distributions with fixed means as well, with a skew in either direction (simulations not presented).
Figure A.1: Conditional effect of certainty on war onset. This figure summarizes the analysis. For the lower line, $F(z)$ begins as $c_B \sim B(1.5,1.5)$ and collapses to $c_B \sim B(50,50)$. The upper line plots the probability of war for a fixed $F(z)$ as excess certainty ($\theta$) increases. Here $F(z)$ is $c_B \sim B(1.5,1.5)$ and $\theta$ goes from 0 and approaches 1 (with $\theta$ defined as the percentage reduction in variance).
## Appendix to Chapter 3

Descriptive Statistics and Robustness Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table B.1: Summary statistics</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Variable</strong></td>
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**Explanatory Variables**

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**Control Variables**

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Table B.2: Observation Descriptives

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Sample Criteria</th>
<th>Initiating Context</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese Offshore</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>BK1</td>
<td>PRC captures lesser islands and threatens the Tachens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean War Armistice</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>PRC-North Korean attack during settlement deliberations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soviet Nuclear</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Proliferation</td>
<td>US study of preventive attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan Straits I</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>PRC bombards offshore islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dien Bien Phu</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Vietminh offensive against French positions</td>
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<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>US sponsored and supported overthrow of Arbenz</td>
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<td>Suez</td>
<td>1956</td>
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<td>Nationalization prompts attack; prompting Soviet threat</td>
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<td>Jordan I</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>Pro-Egyptian/Syrian and leftist forces threaten Hussein</td>
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<td>Taiwan Straits Turmoil</td>
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<td>Heavy PRC shelling of Quemoy island group</td>
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<td>Syrian shift toward Soviet bloc</td>
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<td>Jordan II</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>BK1</td>
<td>Threats to Hussein’s regime</td>
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<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>BK3</td>
<td>Covert US efforts to change regime</td>
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<td>1958</td>
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<td>PRC attacks offshore islands</td>
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<td>1958</td>
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<td>Soviet ultimatum on Berlin’s status and control</td>
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<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Assassination of reformist editor and coup in Iraq</td>
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<td>Cuba</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>BK3</td>
<td>Soviet aid to Cuba and expropriations of US assets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trujillo</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>Assassination of Trujillo and domestic turmoil in DR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>BK3</td>
<td>Iraqi threat to Kuwait’s independence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berlin Wall</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Challenge to freedom of movement in Berlin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pathet Lao</td>
<td>1961</td>
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<td>Pathet Lao offensive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bay of Pigs</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>US sponsored landing/invasion of Cuba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuoc Vinh</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Vietcong attack on Phuoc Vinh</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan Return</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>BK4</td>
<td>Taiwan considers assault on mainland</td>
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<tr>
<td>China Arms Buildup</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>BK4</td>
<td>Large PRC military buildup in area of Taiwan</td>
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<td>Cuban Missile Crisis</td>
<td>1962</td>
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<td>US response to Soviet missiles in Cuba</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nam Tha</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Pathet Lao take region and threaten Thailand</td>
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<td>Yemen</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>BK3</td>
<td>Civil war in Yemen with broad regional involvement</td>
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<td>1963</td>
<td>BK4</td>
<td>Duvalier instability and threat of communist influence</td>
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<td>China Nuclear</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Proliferation</td>
<td>US consideration of preventive strikes</td>
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<td>Cyprus I</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>Outbreak of intercommunal violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laos I</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>Attempted coup; anti-aircraft firing on US planes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Revolution and hostage situation</td>
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<td>Panama Flag</td>
<td>1964</td>
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<td>Riots in the canal zones</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tonkin Gulf</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Reported attack on US ships</td>
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</table>

Notes: Sample criteria indicates International Crisis Behavior database (ICB), Blechman-Kaplan force level (BKx), possible preventive strike (Proliferation), or Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID). If observations fit multiple categories, only the first is listed. Results robust to including only ICB, BK1, BK2.
Observation Descriptives (continued)

<table>
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<th>Observation</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sample Criteria</th>
<th>Initiating Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pleiku</td>
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<td>ICB</td>
<td>Attack on Camp Holloway in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Government overthrown and civil conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Day War</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Preemptive Israeli strike; Soviet threat of intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tet</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Offensive against US and allied forces in Vietnam War</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>North Korea seizes US naval ship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korea EC-121</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>North Korea shoots down US reconnaissance plane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia Bombing</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>North Vietnam spring offensive and US response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black September</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Syria invades Jordan; threatens Hussein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cienfuegos</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Soviet submarine base in Cuba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia Invasion</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>US expands Vietnam War ground operations into Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos II</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>US expands Vietnam War bombing into Laos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuban Shipping</td>
<td>1971</td>
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<td>Cuban seizure of commercial ships</td>
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<td>Christmas Bombing</td>
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<td>North Vietnam rejects diplomatic efforts</td>
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<td>ICB</td>
<td>Easter Offensive and response in Vietnam War</td>
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<td>1973</td>
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<td>1973</td>
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<td>Libya attacks US reconnaissance flights</td>
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<td>Cyprus II</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>BK3</td>
<td>Turkey invades Cyprus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saigon Fall</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>Fall of Saigon and evacuation of US personnel</td>
</tr>
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<td>Angola</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Large Soviet-back MPLA offensive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mayaguez</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Khmer Rouge seize US cargo ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>Amin holds all US citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran Revolution</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>BK3</td>
<td>Domestic challenges to US-supported Shah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shaba II</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Katangan rebels invade Zaire; threatens US citizens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuban Soviet Brigade</td>
<td>1979</td>
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<td>US intelligence identifies Soviet Brigade in Cuba</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Soviet invasion of Afghanistan</td>
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<td>Iran Hostage</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td>Storming of US embassy and holding US citizens hostage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Sample criteria indicates International Crisis Behavior database (ICB), Blechman-Kaplan force level (BKx), possible preventive strike (Proliferation), or Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID). If observations fit multiple categories, only the first is listed. Results robust to including only ICB, BK1, BK2.
Table B.3: Linear Probability Models

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N  61  61  61  61

*p < 0.1 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

Notes: Ordinary least squares regression with opportunities to use force as unit of analysis.
Figure B.1: Predicted probabilities of conflict across the range of certainty values with 95% confidence intervals. Left panel based on Model 2 from the table of linear probability models. Right panel based on Model 4 from the table of linear probability models. Rug plot shows data distribution.
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*p < 0.1  **p < 0.05  ***p < 0.01

Notes: Penalized maximum likelihood (Firth 1993) with opportunities to use force as unit of analysis.
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*p < 0.1  **p < 0.05  ***p < 0.01

Notes: Logistic regression with opportunities to use force as unit of analysis. Model 1 controls for the president’s time in office, Model 2 for the pruned pessimism dictionary score, Model 3 for the number of speakers, Model 4 for time, and Model 5 for time since the last major US war.
Table B.6: Alternative Standard Error Corrections

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</table>

N 61 61 61 61 61 61

*p < 0.1 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

Notes: Ordinary least squares regression with opportunities to use force as unit of analysis and alternative standard error corrections. The first three models do not use bootstrapped standard errors while the second three models do. The models vary in whether standard errors are clustered, and if so, on what variable as indicated in model title. They are not clustered, clustered on the presidential administration, or clustered on the opponent.
Table B.7: Excluding Repeated Observations from Vietnam War

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*p < 0.1 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

Notes: Logistic regression with opportunities to use force as unit of analysis. All models exclude observations from Vietnam War except for the first observation in each administration. Excluding all Vietnam War observations produces similar results. Models 1 and 2 include the full sample of observations. Model 3 includes only those observations in ICB or meeting Blechman and Kaplan’s levels one and two uses of force. Model 4 excludes observations with fewer than 500 words of text.
Figure B.2: Robustness of conditional relationship across cut points for defining high and low State Department involvement. Zero along x-axis indicates the base case used throughout analysis. Coefficients based on OLS specification (for ease of interpretability) from Model 4 in Table B.2.
Sampling Criteria

International Crisis Behavior Data

Crisis defined as a “situation deriving from change in a state’s internal or external environment which gives rise to decision makers’ perceptions of threat to basic values, finite time for response, and the likelihood of involvement in military hostilities [emphasis in original text].” From Brecher and Wilkenfield (1982) [p. 383].

Blechman and Kaplan Level of Force

- **Level 1:** Use of strategic nuclear unit plus at least one “major” force component

- **Level 2:** Two or three “major” force components used, but not strategic nuclear units

Where a “major” unit is (1) two or more aircraft carrier task groups, (2) more than one army battalion, or (3) one or more combat wings.

Dictionary Validation

I approach dictionary method validation in three ways. The first examines speakers or texts that offer a clear relative ranking of their respective uncertainty levels. Beyond the example included in the main text, I repeat the exercise with two texts from during the Pleiku crisis in 1965. Thomas Hughes, Director of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, was dismayed by an earlier memo from McGeorge Bundy. In Bundy’s memo concerning probable reactions to escalated US bombing in Vietnam, he understated the risk of bombing actions by ignoring probable Chinese reactions. Chinese intervention or support for the North Vietnamese would amount to greater enemy military capabilities and thus is an added source of uncertainty. Hughes writes:

Incomprehensibly to me, the White House memorandum discusses the risks of sustained US air strikes against North Vietnam without examining Chinese Communist responses. However, the two intelligence community products estimate
Chinese Communist air intervention to be quite likely at some stage in this very process.\(^1\)

Again, the measure appropriately identifies Hughes’ memo to be more uncertain than Bundy’s memo (uncertainty scores of 7.7% and 5.3% respectively).

Another validity check compares uncertainty scores of those with historically well-known assessments. For instance, George Ball is widely thought to have been uncertain about what outcomes the US could secure through force in Vietnam. Walt Rostow, in contrast, was an adamant believer that North Vietnamese resolve was limited and the continued application of force would prove effective. In accordance with expectations, the uncertainty score for Ball (5.4%) is higher than that for Rostow (4.6%).

For the second and third validity checks, a research assistant (RA) and I hand coded a subset of documents. For ease of comparability, I use memos in the corpus that are between 50 and 100 words, which provides a subset of 44 documents. Memos are preferable to transcripts for hand coding because transcript speaker texts are removed from the transcript context and consequently substantively harder to interpret as standalone documents. The 50 to 100 word range insures all speaker texts within the subset are relatively comparable and of a length where coders can comprehend the content. The Bradley-Terry scoring approach is based on 381 pairwise comparisons.

The continuous uncertainty score provided by the dictionary method complicates validity assessments as there are not discrete categories to compare to the hand coded categorization scheme. To address this, I dichotomize the dictionary uncertainty scores as either low or not low, where the former category contains texts with uncertainty scores more than one standard deviation below the mean value. Eight of the 44 texts are coded as low uncertainty by this criteria. Using the hand categorization by an RA and myself as a benchmark, the dictionary method accurately classifies 77% and 68% of texts, respectively. Accuracy

\(^1\) Memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Acting Secretary of State Ball, February 8, 1965, *FRUS*, Volume II, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Document 90. Note that this document is not addressed to the president and is therefore only used for validation purposes.
is defined as texts correctly categorized over total texts. F-scores provide an alternative assessment tool that incorporates both categorization precision and recall. Using the RA’s coding as a baseline produces scores of $F_{NL} = .85$ and $F_L = .5$, where the subscripts indicate “not low” uncertainty and “low” uncertainty respectively. Using my own coding produces $F_{NL} = .78$ and $F_L = .42$.

**Randomization Inference**

This section describes the calculation for the test statistic used in the randomization inference robustness tests. First, I “residualize” the data using an OLS specification that excludes the main explanatory variables (certainty and State Department involvement) and their interaction. Second, I regress the residuals on the uncertainty measure for each observation with the sample split based on the level of State Department involvement. Third, the test statistic is equal to the difference in the coefficients from these two linear regressions. This test statistic is then compared to those calculated from 5,000 randomizations of the explanatory variables with are randomly assigned without replacement in each iteration.

**Speakers with Most Text by Administration**

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<th>Johnson</th>
<th>Nixon</th>
<th>Ford</th>
<th>Carter</th>
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<td>Bundy</td>
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<td>Taylor</td>
<td>McNamara</td>
<td>Laird</td>
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*Notes: Speaks with the most text by administration.*


Rumsfeld, Donald. 2001. “Talking Points.”.


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