

# 1 Introduction

Be it thy course to busy giddy minds  
With foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out,  
May waste the memory of the former days.

—William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2*<sup>1</sup>

IN THE LATE SUMMER OF 1998, AT THE HEIGHT OF THE MONICA Lewinsky scandal, U.S. President Bill Clinton authorized air strikes against alleged terrorist targets in Sudan and Afghanistan. Several Clinton critics asserted that the bombings were intended to shift focus from the president's admission that he had lied about having an improper relationship with White House intern Lewinsky. In a *Salon* editorial, for example, Christopher Hitchens wondered why the president hurried to attack: "There is really only one possible answer to that question. Clinton needed to look 'presidential' for a day."<sup>2</sup> And every major media outlet, from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, and NBC, ran stories on the speculations that the bombings were an attempt to divert attention from the scandal.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, on several occasions the administration's top national security aides were compelled to deny publicly that the attacks were linked to the president's personal and legal troubles. For example, Secretary of Defense William Cohen was asked during a press conference whether he had seen the movie *Wag the Dog*, in which a Washington spin doctor fabricates a war to distract the public from the president's liaison with a teenage girl. Cohen declined to answer directly, saying that "The only motivation driving this action today was our absolute obligation to protect the American people from terrorist activities."<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, video rentals of *Wag the Dog* soared.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the administration's emphatic denials, the event exhibited many hallmarks of a classic diversionary use of force, which is to say an international

conflict provoked to whip up nationalist sentiment and rally the populace behind the regime or simply to distract the public from the government's failings. First, the timing was felicitous. Clinton gave the mission a green light on the same day he was asked to provide federal investigators with a DNA sample, which signaled that the Starr Commission had potentially damning forensic evidence of intimate contact with Lewinsky. The White House also announced the strikes just three days after Clinton's prime-time television appearance, in which he confessed to "a critical lapse in judgment, a personal failure" in having an affair with Lewinsky.<sup>6</sup> And the attacks themselves coincided with Lewinsky's second and final grand jury appearance, in which she was questioned about the veracity of Clinton's testimony.

Second, the operation was generally popular. The target, Osama bin Laden's terrorist network, was believed to be responsible for the deadly bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. As a result, even the Republican leadership praised Clinton's decision to use force. House Speaker Newt Gingrich's reaction was typical when he remarked that "if you saw the TV coverage of the two embassy bombings and the caskets come home to America, you know that this is real. . . . I think, based on what I know, that it was the right thing to do at the right time."<sup>7</sup> The public's response was also favorable. In a poll conducted immediately after the raids, 68 percent of respondents approved of Clinton's foreign policy—a high point in his presidency. Most people believed he had acted to protect U.S. national security, not to distract them from the scandal.<sup>8</sup> The American public may have distrusted their president, but they also believed that he was a capable commander-in-chief. Whatever Clinton's actual motivation, the attacks changed the national conversation from sordid assignations in the Oval Office to combating global terrorism.

This is a book about diversionary war. Do leaders use foreign adventure to improve their domestic political fortunes? If so, under what conditions are unpopular governments most likely to deploy this strategy? Are diversionary uses of force successful in reducing domestic discontent? Is diversionary war a more-effective response to internal unrest than, say, making political concessions to opposition groups or suppressing dissent?

Conventional wisdom among the political class maintains that leaders in trouble routinely initiate diversionary conflicts. Since World War II, for example, most U.S. presidents have been suspected, at one point or another, of

provoking or escalating a foreign conflict to rally support for the government or divert attention from the administration's blunders.

In 1948 Harry Truman's political opponents accused him of aggravating the conflict with the Soviet Union, particularly during the Berlin blockade, in order to win votes in a tough election.<sup>9</sup> If Truman had excited tensions with Moscow to increase his popularity with voters, he would have been following the advice of his campaign strategists. Truman's advisors crafted a memo predicting that he would benefit politically if the "battle with the Kremlin" intensified because the "worse matters get, up to a fairly certain point—real danger of imminent war—the more is there a sense of crisis. In times of crisis the American citizen tends to back up his President."<sup>10</sup>

John F. Kennedy also was thought to have engaged in "aggressive posturing in international affairs . . . to improve his domestic image," in particular in his handling of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.<sup>11</sup> Republicans argued that the president manufactured the conflict, which became public less than one month before midterm elections, to help Democrats keep their majority in both houses of Congress. For example, Representative Thomas Curtis of Missouri told his constituents that the crisis was "phony and contrived for election purposes."<sup>12</sup> Even the president's allies questioned his motives. Robert Hilsman, a Kennedy appointee to the Department of State, commented that "behind the policy choices loomed domestic politics. . . . The United States might not [have been] in mortal danger but the administration certainly was."<sup>13</sup>

In May 1975, Gerald Ford sent a Marine task force to rescue the 39-person crew of the U.S. freighter *Mayaguez*, which had been seized by Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces in international waters—a mission described by the *Wall Street Journal* as having "all the elements of an Errol Flynn swash-buckler."<sup>14</sup> When the prisoners were freed, the president's approval ratings surged by 11 points—even though more U.S. troops died in the operation than there were hostages to be rescued.<sup>15</sup> Five years later, while under fire for not using force in the Iranian hostage crisis, Jimmy Carter implied in an interview that Ford had acted in a self-serving manner: "I have a very real political awareness that at least on a transient basis the more drastic the action taken by the President, the more popular he is. When President Ford expended 40 American lives on the *Mayaguez* . . . it was looked upon as a heroic action, and his status as a bold and wise leader rose greatly. This is always a temptation."<sup>16</sup>

Following the U.S. invasion of Grenada on October 25, 1983, Ronald Reagan faced scrutiny from members of Congress and the media, who hinted that the president might have sought to distract the public from the deadly suicide bombing of American and French barracks in Beirut two days earlier.<sup>17</sup> For example, Democratic Representative Peter Kostmayer of Pennsylvania declared that “I haven’t seen a single shred of evidence that American lives were in danger in Grenada.”<sup>18</sup> Francis Clines of the *New York Times* went further, baldly asserting that Reagan had used a “rallying ’round the flag” strategy.<sup>19</sup>

In 1989 George H. W. Bush dispatched more than 24,000 troops to depose the government of Manuel Noriega and restore democracy to Panama. Observers wondered whether the administration was simply “trying to cure its political image problems at home,” as the president had “long been accused of being a ‘wimp’” in matters of foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> But when the administration’s press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, was asked whether the invasion of Panama “was the test of fire that will cause [the president] to be more respected at home and abroad,” Fitzwater responded simply: “We see him . . . as the same bold, visionary, outstanding, strong, macho, strong, whatever, leader he’s always been.”<sup>21</sup>

Critics of George W. Bush maintained that the president escalated the crisis over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the summer and fall of 2002 in order to guarantee Republican control of Congress in the upcoming midterm elections. For example, columnist Frank Rich wrote that Bush’s political strategists knew that “an untelevised and largely underground war [on terror] . . . might not nail election victories without a jolt of shock and awe. It was a propitious moment to wag the dog” in Iraq.<sup>22</sup> Vice President Dick Cheney, in an interview on *Meet the Press*, described such allegations as “reprehensible.”<sup>23</sup>

Presidents have often been accused of using force to distract attention from domestic ills. But do governments actually provoke diversionary wars? And do they work?

Investigating the existence of a diversionary motivation for war is a critically important task for several reasons. First, there is little consensus regarding the accuracy of the diversionary theory of war. Some media and political elites see diversionary war as pervasive, but many scholars deny the existence of a diversionary motivation for interstate conflict, describing it as a “myth.”<sup>24</sup> By clarifying when leaders use diversionary tactics, this book contributes to an important research program in the field of international relations.

Second, interstate wars have enormous consequences in international politics. War can bankrupt treasuries, trigger revolutions, and reshape cultures. And conflict is one of the chief mechanisms by which wealth and power are redistributed in the international system. If there is a relationship between domestic unrest and foreign adventurism, exploring that link may help policy makers anticipate and head off these wars. For example, following the death of North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Il, analysts have conjectured that his son and successor, Kim Jong-un, might be tempted to provoke a diversionary war with South Korea to consolidate his rule and promote domestic cohesion.<sup>25</sup> Insight into the plausibility of this scenario, as well as strategies to dissuade Pyongyang from using diversionary tactics, would be valuable given the potential for such a conflict to destabilize the region.

Third, if governments put their troops in harm's way for domestic political gain rather than to promote the national interest, this is a major issue for legitimate rule. Diversionary war is widely considered immoral, if not criminal. In a democracy the public demands a voice in policy making, but for leaders to use force to win their favor may amount to an impeachable offense.

To some degree, a relationship between domestic politics and the use of force abroad is uncontroversial. The effect of public opinion on foreign policy decision making can be thought of as concentric rings, like those on a shooting target. In the outermost ring are cases in which the willingness of the public to tolerate a leader's decision, say, to commit ground troops is a necessary condition for the use of force. Here, the public has a veto on the government's behavior: if the leader perceives a significant domestic political downside from a bellicose foreign policy, a different course of action will be taken. In 1994 the Clinton administration declined to intervene militarily in the Rwandan genocide, in part because it concluded that the conflict was not a sufficient threat to U.S. interests to expend the political capital required to overcome widespread domestic opposition to action.<sup>26</sup> Almost all uses of force in a democracy such as the United States fall at least within this circle, where domestic opinion provides an acceptability constraint.

In the middle band of the target, we find instances in which domestic political gains are seen as a side benefit of the use of force. Here, generating a rally effect does not contribute to the final policy choice, but the government takes advantage of any domestic dividends from using force. Several of the examples discussed above may fall into this category. For example, Reagan would have invaded Grenada regardless of events in Beirut—the plan to send

troops was set before the bombing. And when he was warned that his opponents might accuse him of using diversionary tactics by intervening in Grenada, Reagan reportedly said that “if this [invasion] was right yesterday, it’s right today and we shouldn’t let the act of a couple terrorists dissuade us from going ahead.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, his administration skillfully used the successful mission in Grenada to shelter the president from criticism over his policy in Lebanon.<sup>28</sup>

In the center of the target are international conflicts that are provoked primarily to reduce the public’s opposition to the government, that is, where domestic discontent is a necessary condition for a leader’s decision to use force abroad. It is these cases—true diversionary wars—that are most contested by scholars.

In *Diversionary War* I argue that the key to understanding the relationship between domestic and international conflict can be found through a new model of government decision making based on the concept of policy substitutability drawn from the literature on foreign policy analysis.<sup>29</sup> The central insight is that governments choose their responses to a given problem from a menu of alternatives that can be substituted for one another. Thinking in terms of policy substitutability puts us in a decision maker’s shoes so that we view diversionary war as one option among many for managing civil unrest. The challenge for the scholar is then to explain why embattled governments initiate diversionary wars instead of attempting a rival solution to their domestic problems, such as buying off opponents—in other words, providing butter instead of using guns.

The book develops the idea of policy substitutability and creates an innovative theoretical framework that can explain when and why leaders select a particular option from the policy menu—in this case, when unpopular leaders use diversionary force. The new policy substitutability approach proposes that government decisions are a product of leader preferences and environmental factors. *Leader preferences* refers to how the decision maker assesses the desirability of each option on the policy menu and then ranks these options from most to least attractive. *Environmental factors* are those conditions that enable or constrain a leader’s ability to pursue these options. Decision makers will choose their preferred response if it is practicable. Alternatively, environmental factors may rule out the top-ranked policy, and the government may select an alternative, and less-palatable, response—the next-highest option on the leader’s policy ranking. Thus, by studying the interaction

between preferences and environmental factors, we can explain the policy choices made by leaders in individual cases.

Therefore, whether and why a government provokes a diversionary war is determined by where this option falls on a decision maker's policy ranking, as well as by whether it is feasible. If the use of diversionary force is a leader's preferred policy response and it is possible, then the state will initiate a diversionary war. However, if another strategy for managing domestic unrest is ranked higher but environmental factors eliminate it from the menu of available responses, then the government again may be pushed toward fighting a diversionary war. The substitutability approach suggests then that some (or perhaps even most) diversionary wars could occur not because they are an intrinsically attractive response to unrest but rather because environmental factors have eliminated higher-ranked options. It also suggests that diversionary war might occur only rarely because most leaders place it low on their policy ranking and at least one of the more-appealing policies will generally be practicable.

Another advantage of this decision-making framework is that it enables scholars to discover new causal variables that may be both crucially important and otherwise overlooked, namely, those factors in the environment that alter the practicability of various menu options. It is easy to neglect the effect of environmental factors on decision making because they may only indirectly contribute to a government's final policy choice, by eliminating preferred alternatives and compelling leaders to select riskier policies. To detect the effect of these environmental factors, scholars have to ask the following: what are the main options on a menu for addressing a given policy challenge, and which conditions are likely to eliminate one or more of these options? Without using the substitutability approach, one is unlikely to systematically consider these questions, and the critical role played by environmental factors will remain hidden.

Applying the substitutability approach to the question of whether governments wage diversionary wars reveals the importance of one critical environmental factor, extractive capacity, or a state's ability to efficiently mobilize societal resources, generally through taxation. Along with launching a full-scale diversionary war, the menu of common responses to domestic unrest includes low-level diversionary conflicts against targets that are unlikely to fight back (which I term "diversionary spectacles"), political reform, economic reform, repression, inviting foreign military intervention, and "muddling through," or delaying action. Extractive capacity shapes whether governments

can adopt these policies because several of the menu options (e.g., diversionary war, economic reform, and repression) are likely to be more expensive than others (e.g., diversionary spectacles, political reform, requesting foreign intervention, and muddling through). Crucially, governments with a high extractive capacity, which I label *princely* states, can afford a wide range of responses to unrest, while those with a low extractive capacity, or *pauper* states, choose from a more-limited policy menu.

Extractive capacity has been neglected in prior studies of diversionary war because it functions as a permissive condition in princely states and often indirectly shapes decision making in pauper states. However, if a high extractive capacity enables the leader of a princely state to adopt the preferred response to unrest from the menu of options (for example, expensive economic reforms), it is a necessary condition for this policy choice. Similarly, if the leader of a pauper state stages a diversionary spectacle because enacting economic reforms (a response that he or she prefers) is deemed too costly, then a necessary cause of the decision to provoke a spectacle lies in the state's limited ability to extract resources.

Using the substitutability approach, I deduce hypotheses regarding how leader preferences and extractive capacity together influence whether and when unstable governments use diversionary force. The core prediction is a counterintuitive one: pauper states are more likely than princely states to fight diversionary wars.

Why would impoverished regimes wield the sword? The basic logic is that a full-scale diversionary war is often seen by decision makers as an especially treacherous response to internal instability and will be placed low on their policy rankings. If leaders are drawn to using diversionary tactics, they will prefer a diversionary spectacle to a war—although the potential rally effect is smaller, because it does not entail major combat operations, the danger of having the conflict result in a battlefield defeat or foreign occupation is also smaller. Leaders of princely states will rarely provoke diversionary wars because they can generally afford to adopt more-palatable alternatives. Leaders of pauper states would also rather avoid fighting diversionary wars, not only because this policy option is unattractive, but also because it is too costly.

But pauper states may occasionally be pulled into fighting unwanted and expensive diversionary wars, precisely because of their limited resources. The reason is that diversionary spectacles staged by pauper states are more likely to escalate. All else being equal, governments targeted by resource-poor



governments will tend to fight back, viewing their adversary as vulnerable. Further, pauper states are more likely to provoke diversionary spectacles because preferred policies are too costly, meaning that they are often acting out of desperation. And when leaders are faced with few alternative courses of action, they are inclined to succumb to psychological bias and exaggerate the likelihood that the policy they select will succeed. This may mean downplaying the likelihood that the crisis will escalate into full-scale war.

Thus, the substitutability approach can explain why scholars are inclined to question the existence of full-scale diversionary wars—they are infrequent and rarely intended.

*Diversionary War* also takes on an additional, seldom studied question: do diversionary wars work? There are reasons to suspect that a diversionary war is not a sound strategy for managing domestic instability, namely high-profile debacles such as Argentina's diversionary war with Britain over the Falkland Islands in 1982, which resulted in the junta's ouster. However, there is little empirical research on whether war generally fuels or dampens unrest. And no studies have examined whether a diversion is more or less effective than the other options on the policy menu. Yet to accurately assess the wisdom of using diversionary force, we must weigh its utility compared to alternative responses to unrest. The book demonstrates that prudent leaders should avoid fighting diversionary wars; at best, they have no effect on internal stability. Instead, unpopular leaders will likely have greater success by addressing the public's pocketbook concerns and enacting economic reform measures.

In summary, *Diversionary War* makes important contributions to both our understanding of diversionary war and the wider scholarship on government decision making. It illuminates when and why unstable governments fight diversionary wars: the most likely scenario is that embattled pauper states provoke crises against high-risk targets that spiral uncontrollably into major military campaigns. This research also assesses the consequences of diversionary war, revealing that this policy is an ill-advised response to domestic disaffection.

The book advances the literature on policy substitutability more generally, by introducing a new decision-making framework that can better explain why governments select particular options from a given policy menu. This framework has wide applicability beyond diversionary war—it can be used to analyze how leaders respond to any policy challenge where they could pursue many alternative courses of action.

The book also has significant implications for policy makers who want to prevent diversionary wars. By shedding light on the conditions that precipitate diversionary war, leaders can identify which unstable regimes are most likely to employ diversionary tactics—particularly pauper states that are inclined to initiate spectacles against high-risk targets—and channel them toward a substitute strategy for managing their domestic troubles. Indeed, the book identifies several new avenues that could prompt embattled governments to select a different option from the menu of responses to domestic unrest, such as political or economic reform.

• • •

The remainder of the book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 presents the new policy substitutability approach for explaining government decision making and articulates how this framework can reveal the conditions under which unstable states fight diversionary wars. This chapter also reviews the state of knowledge regarding the efficacy of diversionary war and argues that we must study the utility of war as a tactic for reducing domestic unrest relative to the alternative strategies on the policy menu.

Chapter 3 is the first of four empirical chapters examining the causes and consequences of diversionary war. This chapter includes a cross-national statistical analysis, which examines whether the propensity of unstable states to fight interstate wars depends on extractive capacity. It finds, for example, that pauper states are indeed more likely than princely states to fight full-scale diversionary wars.

Beginning with a quantitative analysis has at least two advantages. First, nearly all of the prior research on the diversionary theory of war is quantitative. Using a statistical approach makes it possible to directly compare the argument presented here with claims in the extant literature. Second, examining a large number of cases increases our confidence that any findings are generalizable.

Chapter 3 also describes a quantitative study of how interstate war affects domestic unrest compared to alternative options on the policy menu. This analysis, the first of its kind, demonstrates that interstate war is a misguided strategy for managing civil strife and that leaders are better served adopting alternative policies.

Chapters 4 through 6 present five in-depth studies of responses by pauper states to domestic unrest. Building on the quantitative finding that extractive

capacity is generally related to interstate war, here I examine the mechanism by which extractive capacity shapes government decision making. I focus on pauper states because resource-poor governments are most likely to fight diversionary wars. Chapter 4 examines a case of diversionary war: Argentina's invasion of the British Falkland Islands in 1982. Chapter 5 investigates a diversionary spectacle that did not escalate into a full-scale diversionary war: the U.S. government's expedition to replace Brigham Young as territorial governor of Utah in 1857. And Chapter 6 presents three cases in which unstable pauper states chose not to use diversionary tactics: French King Louis XVI's political reform measures to address growing elite discontent in 1788, the Habsburg monarchy's appeal for Russian military intervention to suppress the Hungarian revolution in 1849, and the Peruvian government's attempt to muddle through with a failing policy of repression against the communist movement Sendero Luminoso in 1988.

The purpose of the case studies is fourfold. First, they permit a close analysis of the manner by which extractive capacity shapes government decision making. In each case, for example, I find that a low extractive capacity consistently caused leaders of pauper states to avoid preferred, but costly, strategies for managing unrest, such as widespread repression, full-scale diversionary war, and economic reform. Second, these cases are similarly organized, enabling a structured, focused comparison of the conditions that lead some pauper states to use diversionary tactics while others avoid them altogether. The comparative analysis also points to the factors that cause some diversionary spectacles to escalate into full-scale wars, while others do not. Third, the case studies are used to search for new environmental factors, in addition to extractive capacity, that might influence government decision making during periods of internal instability. That is, they aid with theory building. Fourth, having found in Chapter 3 that diversionary wars are generally ineffectual, the cases generate new insights into why this strategy is not particularly successful in managing unrest.

Chapter 7 reviews the main findings of the book, including when and why unstable governments use diversionary tactics, the conditions that cause some diversionary spectacles to escalate into wars, and a new explanation for why diversionary uses of force fail to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels, and waste memories of former ills. It concludes with the implications of the book for policy making.