Bargaining Failures and Civil War

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Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 2009. 12:243–61

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at polisci.annualreviews.org

This article's doi:
10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.135301

1094-2939/09/0615-0243$20.00

Key Words

conflict, negotiation, war onset, war duration, war resolution

Abstract

This article explores the many bargaining failures that may occur at every stage in intrastate disputes: before fighting breaks out, as a war is being fought, and once a war ends. It argues that disputes that occur within states are particularly susceptible to information and commitment problems. It also reveals why certain countries have more difficulty overcoming these problems than others do. This represents the most comprehensive overview to date of bargaining failures associated with civil wars.

INTRODUCTION

Bargains are difficult to reach and implement in civil wars. In fact, they are notably harder to attain in civil wars than in interstate wars (see Pillar 1983, Walter 1997). Fewer negotiated settlements are signed; if they are signed, they are less likely to be implemented; and even if they are implemented, they are more likely to break down (see Licklider 1995, Walter 2002, Elbadawi & Sambanis 2002). It is no surprise, therefore, that civil wars tend to last longer, end more often in decisive military victories, and recur at a higher rate than wars between states.

Despite these problems, most studies of civil war have focused on the underlying structural conditions that encourage groups to go to war rather than on the bargaining problems that may stand in the way of settlement [see Blattman & Miguel (2009) for a comprehensive survey of the recent literature on civil war in both economics and political science]. In fact, the two main empirical studies on civil war concentrated only on the economic, political, social, and geographic characteristics of countries at the expense of more strategic factors (Collier & Hoeffler 2004, Collier et al. 2006, Fearon & Laitin 2003).[1] There is now near consensus that poverty, large populations, a low level of economic development, a prior history of civil war, and political instability increase a country's risk of civil war.[2] There is also some evidence that a dependence on natural resources, the existence of ethnic diasporas, concentrated populations, rough terrain, and anocracies are positively associated with the outbreak of civil war.[3] Less well understood are the negotiations that occur between governments and rebels as they attempt to resolve disputes, and the reasons why these attempts frequently fail.

This article starts from the observation that many existing studies, though helpful in identifying country-level factors associated with civil war, are limited in two important ways. Theoretically, they cannot explain why governments in at-risk countries do not sign more negotiated settlements. This is especially puzzling given the high costs of these wars [for a discussion of some long-term costs of civil wars, see Ghobarah et al. (2003)]. Governments, aware that poverty, state weakness, and low economic growth place them at higher risk of war, should take these conditions into account and offer deals that reduce the possibility of violence. Poverty should not cause civil war so much as it should cause governments to compensate potential rebels in some other way.

Existing studies also cannot explain variation in the outbreak of violence across countries that are at similar risk of civil war given the conditions mentioned above. Many countries around the world are poor and underdeveloped and go through periods of political instability, yet most do not experience civil war. Among those that do, there is great variation in the duration and recurrence of violence across cases. Some civil wars, like those in Mozambique, Colombia, and Ethiopia, have lasted more than three decades, while others have lasted only a few months. If the same underlying factors encourage war across cases, why do some last so much longer than others? Finally, some countries suffer only one civil war whereas others face recurring violence over time. Again, if the same conditions increase a country's risk of war, why are some states able to escape additional wars while others are not?

In what follows, I explore how bargaining theory helps explain these puzzles.[4] I argue that

[1] Additional econometric studies on various aspects of civil war onset include Esty et al. (1998), Gurr (2000), Hegre et al. (2001), Gurr & Moore (1997), and Elbadawi & Sambanis (2002). For an excellent summary of the quantitative studies of civil war onset, see Gates (2002).

[2] Poverty is measured as per capita income, and political instability as a three-or-greater change in the Polity IV regime index in any of the three years prior to the country-year in question.

[3] Rough terrain represented the proportion of a country that was mountainous; anocracies were regimes that scored between −5 and +5 on differences between Polity IV's democracy and autocracy measure.

[4] Noncooperative bargaining theory originated in economics and was first introduced to the study of war by Fearon (1995). For an excellent review of this literature see Kreps & Wilson (1993).

the low rate of settlement in civil wars is due to particularly severe bargaining problems that can occur at every stage in a dispute—before fighting breaks out, as a war is being fought, and once a war ends. I also argue that certain countries have more trouble overcoming these problems and that these countries are more likely to experience violence as a result. By viewing the decision to fight as part of a larger bargaining process and not as a single isolated event, scholars can better explain why bargains are so rare in civil wars and why violence is more likely in some countries than others.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections. The first reviews the literature on bargaining and war and discusses why this approach applies particularly well to the problem of civil war. The second addresses our first puzzle—civil war onset. Here, I introduce a number of arguments about how information and commitment problems can make prewar settlements difficult to reach and implement. The third section takes up the puzzle of civil war duration. It explains why some governments may wish to continue a war even as information is being revealed about their opponent, and why some rebels may reject a settlement if concerns over post-treaty exploitation have not been addressed. The fourth section examines the problem of recurring civil war, focusing on the amount of information revealed by the previous war and the way in which negotiated settlements may help or hinder the postwar peace. Together these sections provide the most comprehensive overview to date of bargaining problems that may occur in intrastate disputes and the contexts in which they are likely to escalate to war.

BARGAINING PROBLEMS AND CIVIL WAR

A fairly large literature exists on bargaining problems in interstate wars (see, e.g., Schelling 1960; Pillar 1983; Wittman 1979; Ikle 2005; Fearon 1995, 1998; Wagner 2000; Powell 1999, 2002, 2006; Smith & Stam 2004; Filson & Werner 2002; Reiter 2003; Slantchev 2003, 2004). This body of work offers three basic explanations for why states in the international system might pursue a war despite the existence of less costly alternatives. The first focuses on private information governments have about their capabilities and resolve and the benefits they receive by withholding or misrepresenting this information (Blainey 1973 provides the classic argument about information as a cause of war). The second focuses on the difficulties governments encounter in credibly committing to peace agreements. The third focuses on problems associated with dividing stakes that are difficult or impossible to share. Below, I introduce each of these problems and discuss why they are likely to be particularly debilitating in civil wars.

Information Asymmetries

Formal theory has shown that if parties involved in a dispute had complete information about the outcome of a war, they would almost always prefer a settlement to the costs and risks of war (see especially Fearon 1995). Wars still occur, however, in part because parties have private information about their ability to wage a successful fight and incentives to suppress or exaggerate this information in pursuit of a better deal. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, for example, refused to answer reporters' questions about how the United States planned to conduct a war in Iraq because he believed this information could be used by President Saddam Hussein to organize a more effective defense. Rumsfeld's silence illustrates this basic information dilemma: holding onto one's private information may increase the odds of getting a better deal or winning a war, but it also decreases the odds of settlement.

Information problems are likely to be particularly severe in intrastate disputes for at least two reasons. First, information about the military capabilities of potential rebel groups is often cloudy and difficult to obtain. If the adversary were an independent state, information about its government's strength and capabilities would likely be on display or publicly

acknowledged, but information about the size of potential rebel armies, their financial flows, the degree of support among the population, and their organization is usually unavailable. The government of Nepal, for example, had limited information on Maoist rebels who operated in the western regions of the state even after ten years of war. Moreover, potential rebel groups may not know the degree of their own strength without first engaging in battle and building support over time.

Second, even if domestic groups had full information about their capabilities and strength, particularly strong incentives exist to withhold this information from a government whose control over internal security forces would allow it to easily exploit this information to repress the group. Rebel groups, therefore, are likely to be more protective of private information about their capabilities and far less forthcoming with the truth.

Information asymmetries, however, do not explain the subset of conflicts where combatants do not sign or implement settlements even after long wars have been fought and much information revealed. Two additional bargaining problems—the problem of credible commitments and the problem of indivisible stakes—may help explain these more intractable cases.

Difficulties Credibly Committing to Settlements

According to the bargaining and war literature, commitment problems may make war a rational strategy in situations where the disputants cannot credibly promise to adhere to an agreement over time (see especially Wagner 2000, Fearon 2004, Powell 2006). If a settlement cannot be enforced over time and leaves one or both sides vulnerable to attack or abuse, then a decisive military victory may be viewed as the safest and most stable way to resolve a conflict.

Like information problems, commitment problems are likely to be particularly acute in intrastate conflicts. There are two reasons for this. First, large power asymmetries almost always exist between governments and potential rebel groups, which make it easy for governments to renege on promises. Governments can offer to reform the political process, share power, or transfer autonomy to competitors, but these weaker competitors will have little ability to penalize a government should it fail to follow through (Paris 2004). In contrast, states in the international system have a variety of economic, political, and military means to keep each other in line.

Second, even if a domestic group can threaten to use force, it will almost always become militarily weaker and more vulnerable as a result of a settlement. That is because settlements almost always require rebels to demobilize their soldiers as part of the deal; rarely are two competing armies or militias allowed to coexist within a single state (see Walter 1997, 2002; Fearon 1998, 2004).[5] The same is true of territory which rebellious groups control and from which they are able to operate. Soon after a settlement is signed, control over territory is likely to be transferred back to the central government, decreasing the strength of the group (see Walter 1997, 2002). Thus, unlike states in the international system, which can withdraw to their separate territories and defensively reinforce their militaries after a settlement is signed, combatants in domestic disputes become progressively more vulnerable and less able to enforce an agreement the more they implement its terms.

Indivisible Stakes

The final bargaining problem has to do with the stakes over which disputants are fighting. Negotiated settlements may sometimes be difficult to reach if combatants cannot divide the stakes over which they are fighting (see Randle 1973, Pillar 1983, Zartman 1995, Ikle 2005). According to Pillar (1983, p. 24), "[t]he likelihood that the two sides in any dispute can negotiate a

[5] A few peace agreements have allowed rebels to keep their arms, as in a number of conflicts in Burma. These cases circumvent the most difficult commitment problem discussed here.

settlement depends greatly on whether compromise agreements are available. If the stakes are chiefly indivisible, so that neither side can get most of what it wants without depriving the other of most of what it wants, negotiations are less apt to be successful." If both sides seek sole ownership over a piece of territory, or control over a single government, then a settlement short of war may be unworkable.[6]

In theory, divisibility issues should be easy to resolve. Disputants should be able to divide stakes in a variety of creative ways, such as alternating control over the presidency, as the Conservatives and Liberals did in Colombia in 1958, or allowing one side to control all cabinet posts while the other side controls the presidency. Disputants can also offer side-payments to the party who relinquishes claims to a stake, similar to ransoms offered in exchange for kidnapping victims. In reality, however, divisibility problems appear to be more difficult to resolve, especially in disputes over symbolically and strategically important territory (see Hassner 2004, Goddard 2006, Toft 2006). The war between Israel and the Palestinians, and in particular the dispute over control of Jerusalem, is often mentioned as an example of such an impasse. "How else," asks Toft (2003, p. 1), "can we explain why, in places like Jerusalem and Kosovo, men and women not only are willing to die but also allow their sons and daughters to die just to remain in their homeland?" Decisive military victories may be the only acceptable means for the two sides to resolve these particularly impassioned claims.

In what follows, I explore the ways in which bargaining problems—especially information and commitment problems—explain the variation we observe in the outbreak, duration, and resolution of civil wars across similarly at-risk cases. What we see is that focusing on governments and rebel groups as strategic actors operating in an environment where information is scarce and enforcement is difficult can help explain much about their behavior before, during, and after a war. Other factors, such as the grievances a group has against its government and the opportunity it has to organize, are almost certainly necessary for wars to occur. But bargaining problems are likely to be a key reason combatants fail to reach a settlement.

EXPLAINING WHY CIVIL WARS BEGIN

One of the central puzzles surrounding civil wars, and one which existing accounts cannot explain, is why governments and rebels are willing to pursue these wars despite their high costs and despite the existence of less costly alternatives. This is especially striking given that disputants in civil wars suffer the full physical, economic, and social costs of war. In contrast to interstate wars, civil war opponents cannot export the pain of war by fighting on someone else's territory; all the negative effects of war—death, loss of land and infrastructure, adverse health effects, and damage to economic growth—are borne solely by the population and its government.

The high price disputants are willing to pay to prosecute a civil war is particularly surprising given the existence of less costly alternatives. Governments have the option to avoid civil wars by offering discontented domestic groups sufficiently large concessions and reforms to win their submission. Canada awarded the Quebecois a series of political provisions designed to address their drive for independence. Nicaragua, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Bolivia have granted various degrees of autonomy to indigenous groups unhappy with years of discrimination and neglect. Macedonia granted ethnic Albanians increased minority rights and constitutional reforms. The Czechoslovakian government offered Slovakia full independence.

Civil wars, however, continue to occur despite the possibility of less costly compromise solutions. Confederacy President

[6]Fearon (1995) briefly discusses and then dismisses divisibility problems, arguing that solutions short of war are almost always available. Similarly, Powell (2006) argues that divisibility issues are a subset of commitment problems, where disputants fear that the agreed-upon division will not be implemented.

Jefferson Davis would have done better by accepting President Lincoln's offer of amnesty plus partial compensation in 1863–1864 than by fighting to a decisive defeat in 1865 (McPherson 2003). Rhodesia's Prime Minister Ian Smith would have benefited more by agreeing to limited majority rule before he fought and lost a war against the much larger black population. The Indonesian government could have saved hundreds of millions of dollars by granting independence to East Timor in 1975 rather than granting independence after a brutal 24-year war. Yet each of these governments still chose to fight.

Information Problems and the Outbreak of Civil War

Information problems offer at least a partial reason why more settlements are not reached between governments and domestic groups seeking change. In the following subsections, I introduce two possible information problems that could make war a rational option. The first problem is uncertainty regarding rebel capabilities—in particular a rebel group's ability to finance a war—and has yet to be tested. The second is uncertainty over a government's willingness to fight and its desire to signal toughness when many potential challengers exist. It has been tested against separatist conflicts but not against other types of civil wars.

Uncertainty regarding rebel financing. Most governments know that multiple groups within society would like to obtain concessions from the government, yet only a handful of them have the ability to prosecute a lengthy war. One of the main challenges a government faces, therefore, is to determine which groups have the ability to inflict heavy costs and which do not.

In order to prosecute a war against the state, rebel groups need reliable sources of financing and support. This support can come from outside patrons (such as diaspora groups or other sympathetic third parties), from access to and trade in natural resources (such as diamonds or oil), or from the production of agricultural products (such as cashews, bananas, or coca) (see Le Billon 2001, Ross 2004, Ballentine & Sherman 2003).

A group's access to these resources, however, is often ambiguous and subject to change. Rebels may enjoy the support of a foreign government early in a conflict only to lose this backing when the patron's political, economic, or ideological circumstances change.[7] Irish-Americans were the primary source of funding for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) until Prime Minister Thatcher asked President Reagan to help stop the flow of cash. Angola's UNITA rebels lost the backing of the United States and South Africa when the Cold War ended (after which they obtained financing by taking control of lucrative diamond fields). Rebels in Colombia, Burma, and Nepal have access to coca and poppies, but these resources are vulnerable to drought and disease, antidrug policing, and fluctuations in world demand.

Governments do not know what type of rebel organization they are facing, and this uncertainty creates disincentives to settle with every group that threatens war. Assume for simplicity's sake that rebel groups come in two types: deep-pocketed groups and shallow-pocketed ones. Deep-pocketed groups have the financial backing to pursue a lengthy and costly war against the government; shallow-pocketed groups do not. Groups have some idea about where they are likely to obtain support and how dependable this support is likely to be; their information about their financing, though imperfect, is significantly better than the government's. Ideally, governments would prefer to negotiate only with deep-pocketed groups who have the ability to inflict heavy costs if the

[7] Although not discussed in this article, uncertainty also exists regarding a government's true military strength. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, for example, was highly dependent on the United States for funding during the Chinese civil war, yet U.S. support was inconsistent; aid was suspended for much of 1946–1948. I focus on the uncertainty surrounding rebel financing because it is less public and less easy to observe than government sources of revenue.

government fails to grant concessions. They do not want to compromise unnecessarily with weak groups, of which there are many. They would also prefer to avoid signaling that they are willing to negotiate simply because a group threatens violence. If the government offered concessions to every group that made demands, it would be inundated with requests. Governments, therefore, have strong incentives to identify and reward only those groups strong enough to punish the government if it refuses to yield.

Governments, however, have difficulty discriminating between deep-pocketed and shallow-pocketed groups without first engaging them in battle. This is the heart of the first information problem standing in the way of a settlement, and it is twofold. First, the extent of rebel financing is difficult to ascertain; an accurate assessment would require extensive monitoring of a group and its activities, which is often beyond a government's capacity. Second, both deep-pocketed and shallow-pocketed rebel groups have strategic incentives to misrepresent the private information they have about their financing and support. Shallow-pocketed rebels are likely to exaggerate their strength in hopes of obtaining at least some concessions from the government. Deep-pocketed rebels are likely to withhold key information about supply lines fearing the government will intervene to block them.

The challenge for the government is to determine just how well-supplied a particular group is and to make concessions only to the deep-pocketed ones. Governments can do this in one of two ways. First, they can attempt to deduce information from certain observable indicators. Some sources of support, for example, are well known and easy to observe, such as a large diaspora group or a wealthy foreign patron. This was the case for Margaret Thatcher, who knew that most of the IRA's funding in the 1970s and 1980s came from Irish-Americans. Governments can also attempt to obtain information by monitoring group behavior, tracking financial transactions, observing resource extraction activity, and increasing the number of customs agents monitoring the movement of supplies across borders.

In cases where governments do not have broad monitoring capabilities or where monitoring is difficult owing to terrain or geographic size, a second source of information is needed. Governments can demand that deep-pocketed groups send a costly signal before being granted concessions. War is a costly signal by which governments can distinguish deep-pocketed from shallow-pocketed groups and one of the ways governments determine when and with whom to settle. The longer a group is able to fight, the more likely it is to be well funded, and the more likely a government is to make a deal.[8]

But why would shallow-pocketed groups agree to fight if war is bound to reveal their weakness? From a bargaining standpoint, the main reason weak groups engage in war is to trick the government into thinking they are actually strong. If shallow-pocketed groups can survive for a period of time, they may be able to convince governments to offer them better deals (see Fearon 2007 for a developed model). A second reason is that rebel groups are uncertain about the extent and reliability of their own financing. As mentioned above, rebels have some idea about where they are likely to obtain support, but they do not have perfect information about how this is likely to play out over the course of a war. Additional funding might be procured during the war, the war itself may allow rebels to capture resource-rich territory (as was the case in Angola and Colombia), and wealthy patrons may materialize; such developments are difficult to anticipate early in a conflict. In addition, rebels may not be the beneficiaries of perfect information from their own patrons regarding how much money and assistance they are likely to receive over

[8]How much time will governments need to be convinced that a rebel group has staying power? In a study of all civil wars between 1940 and 1996, Walter (2002) found that governments were significantly more willing to offer concessions to rebel groups that were able to continue the war for at least 72 months. This suggests that governments may require, on average, six years of fighting to ascertain just how strong and resolute a group is.

time. Third-party sponsors may have their own strategic reasons for withholding information even from groups they wish to support. For the more shallow-pocketed groups, therefore, war may also be the means by which they obtain important information about their ability to prosecute and sustain a war over time.

This first information problem, therefore, could help explain variation in the outbreak of war even in countries with similar risk factors. Countries that experience civil wars are likely to be those where information about rebel capabilities is most uncertain. Uncertainty, in turn, depends on two factors: (*a*) how obvious it is that the rebels are weak or strong and (*b*) how easy it is for governments to observe and monitor rebel strength and support. Uncertainty is highest in countries where the capabilities of the rebel group are neither so great that the government knows war will be costly, nor so meager that the government knows rebellion is unlikely. Governments that face challengers in the middle range of capabilities are most likely to use war to reveal this information for them. Uncertainty is also likely to be highest in countries where monitoring is difficult owing to large geographic size, difficult-to-navigate terrain, and/or large population masses. Each of these factors makes it easier for potential rebel groups to evade government oversight and retain private information about their own relative strength. Governments, therefore, that cannot collect reliable and consistent information about groups operating within their borders may benefit from the information war provides about those who should be compensated.

Uncertainty regarding government resolve. Governments, however, may have incentives to go to war for a second reason. Here, the focus is on the private information governments have about their own willingness to engage in battle and the incentives they have to signal toughness when numerous potential challengers exist (see Walter 2006b, 2009).

Just as there are deep- and shallow-pocketed rebel groups, so too are there more committed and less committed governments. Committed governments are those that are willing to fight to maintain the status quo. Uncommitted governments are those that are willing to make concessions in exchange for peace. A government's commitment is likely to be influenced by numerous factors, such as the degree of domestic political support it has to continue a war. The stronger the current government's domestic support, the more committed it is likely to be to maintain its current policies. Governments with tenuous domestic support, or constituencies unwilling to bear the costs of war, are likely to be under greater pressure to settle.

Governments know how eager they are to fight or settle, but potential rebels do not. This is the heart of the second information problem creating incentives for governments to fight. Governments understand that potential domestic challengers will attempt to determine whether the government in power is committed, and that the potential challengers will use this information to determine whether to challenge. If a potential rebel group observes a government granting concessions to another group making similar demands, it may increase its belief that it faces an uncommitted government likely to concede again in the future. A government, therefore, that chooses to make peace with one challenger knows it will reveal itself to be uncommitted, creating incentives for other groups to act.

The fact that concessions reveal important information about government resolve means that uncommitted governments have strong incentives to behave as if they were tough, at least against early challengers. Fighting early competitors offers two benefits to otherwise conciliatory governments. First, it may convince an immediate challenger that war is too costly to continue, inducing that challenger to accept a reduced settlement early in the war. Second, it may signal to other groups in society that the government is committed to the status quo, convincing them to stay quiet. War, then, is a means by which governments can manipulate private information about their

own resolve to convince future rivals to stay quiet.[9]

But again, bluffing is not necessary in all situations, and this is why war may break out in some countries but not others. Reputation building makes sense in a country whose government anticipates a series of rebellions over time but not in a country with only a limited number of unhappy groups. War, therefore, should be significantly more likely in countries with a large number of disaffected groups (such as a large number of ethnic minorities desiring self-determination or many groups seeking political reform). The greater the number of potential challengers, the greater the need to bluff, and the more likely a government is to go to war.

The two information problems just discussed—uncertainty over rebel capabilities and uncertainty over government resolve—suggest two ways in which private information and incentives to misrepresent this information may cause civil wars to break out.[10] If settling has the effect of rewarding domestic groups that pose no actual threat, or encouraging additional challenges from other groups within society, then the costs and risks of one war may actually offer a better alternative to governments than having to make multiple deals with multiple groups. As long as potential rebel groups have incentives to exaggerate their ability to wage war, and governments have incentives to exaggerate how tough and resilient they are likely to be, war may be a rational means to minimize long-term costs of numerous internal challenges.

Commitment Problems and the Outbreak of Civil War

Information problems, however, are not the only reason negotiated settlements may not be reached before a civil war breaks out. A second type of bargaining problem—commitment problems—helps explain cases where negotiations are never attempted, or if negotiations occur, settlements are never signed and implemented.

At least three types of countries are likely to encounter difficult commitment problems when attempting to resolve domestic crises: (*a*) countries with weak political and legal institutions, (*b*) countries with highly politicized and fixed cleavages, and (*c*) countries where shifts in power between different societal groups are expected to occur over time.

Weak political and legal institutions. At their heart, commitment problems are problems of treaty enforcement, now and in the future. Governments and potential rebel groups would have little to fear from a negotiated settlement if they were certain that the terms would be implemented and enforced over time. If this were the case, a group could sign an agreement, such as one that offered democratic reform, and know that free and fair elections would be held and power would be peacefully transferred over time. Groups worry, however, that governments will renege on their promises, exploit the peace, and use an agreement to their long-term advantage. This fear is especially strong in countries where political and legal institutions are not strong enough to check executive control; Fearon & Laitin (2003) and Skaperdas (2008) both find that countries with weak government institutions were more likely to experience civil war. Iraqi Sunnis, for example, boycotted the January 2005 elections in part because no assurances existed that majority Shi'a would share power once safely in

[9]This argument comes directly from the literature on reputation and entry deterrence in economics (see especially Selten 1978, Milgrom & Roberts 1982, Kreps & Wilson 1982). For an application to international relations, especially the problem of violent separatist movements, see Walter (2009).

[10]These are not the only information problems that may encourage war. Uncertainty is also likely to exist about other factors that affect what we call "capabilities and resolve." De Figueiredo & Weingast (1999), for example, offer an insightful explanation for civil war that rests on uncertainty regarding the trustworthiness of leaders and their willingness to follow through with a peace agreement. The argument outlined above, however, should apply equally well to these other areas of uncertainty.

control of government. This problem has also been prevalent in Africa, where most attempts by postcolonial governments to democratize have dissolved into one-party states, military governments, or personalistic dictatorships; Bates (2008) has studied why this might be so. As long as weaker groups have little ability to enforce the terms of an agreement, potential rebel groups may prefer the risks of war to the potentially higher costs of easy exploitation by the government.

Cemented cleavages. Credible commitments are also particularly difficult to make to minority groups in countries with fixed political cleavages. This is because the majority almost always has the numbers to override promises made to a weaker rival, and the minority can do little to prevent this. Minority Sunnis in Iraq face this problem when negotiating any type of power-sharing agreement with the majority Shi'a. The Shi'a can promise any number of divisions, but the Sunnis have little reason to believe that these will be enforced over time, especially after American troops leave. A similar problem exists in the Philippines; successive presidents have found it difficult to reassure Muslims in Mindanao that they will faithfully transfer political autonomy, given how unpopular this transfer is with the majority Christian population [this is the "sons of the soil" problem discussed by Fearon (2004)]. In cases where governments do not have significant domestic political support for concessions, credible commitments to such deals are difficult to make.

Relative gains accrue over time. A commitment problem, however, is also likely to arise in countries where the relative power of different groups is expected to change over time (see Powell 2004). This can occur for a variety of reasons, including a rising birth rate that favors one group over another. The civil war in Lebanon in 1975 was partly in response to the refusal of the Christian minority to renegotiate the distribution of political power to reflect the increasing percentage of Muslims in the country. Commitment problems can also emerge owing to demographic changes that result from changing international boundaries, as occurred shortly after the breakdowns of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In both cases, newly independent governments had difficulty credibly committing to honor the rights of ethnic minorities that found themselves stranded on the wrong side of newly drawn international borders. Changes in the distribution of power can also arise from the settlement itself. Israel has been hesitant to transfer additional territory to the Palestinians, in part, because it fears that this will allow Hamas and Hezbollah to increase their demands and renew attacks against Israel from an improved territorial position.

Commitment problems, therefore, can account for some of the variation in the outbreak of violence across countries. All else equal, negotiated settlements are less likely to be signed and implemented in countries with weak political and legal institutions, in countries with highly politicized cleavages, and in countries where one of the disputants is known to be gaining strength over time.

EXPLAINING WHY SOME CIVIL WARS LAST LONGER THAN OTHERS

Our second puzzle has to do with the duration of civil wars. Some end relatively quickly while others are fought for decades. There are a number of possible explanations for this variation. Wars may last longer, for example, if one or both sides are particularly committed to a cause and are willing to fight longer and harder to obtain a specific outcome. According to Stedman (1991, p. 12), "what differentiates revolutionaries from others is that they will not compromise under any circumstance. They are ideologically and philosophically committed to their programs and will display an incredible indifference to costs in order to achieve their ideological goals." Wars may also last longer if the two combatants are fairly evenly matched on the battlefield, making it difficult for one side to defeat the other. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, for example, has argued that

"the guerrilla wins if he does not lose" (quoted in Zartman 1995). It is also possible for wars to continue because they are profitable to one or more of the participants (Collier & Hoeffler 2004; see also Collier et al. 2004). UNITA'S control of rich alluvial deposits in Angola and FARC's control over areas of coca production in Colombia may explain why both of these wars have resisted settlement.

But none of these arguments answers the central puzzle of why more efficient settlements are not being drawn. Groups that are extremely committed to their principles and goals should not be averse to a negotiated settlement; they should simply require greater compensation to halt their effort. Similarly, groups that are evenly matched on the battlefield need not fight to the finish; they should simply split the disputed stakes in a manner that reflects their relative capabilities. Finally, soldiers fighting for profits should not be averse to settlement; they simply need to be reimbursed in a different way.

Information Problems and the Duration of Civil War

Once again, information problems help account for combatants' inability or unwillingness to agree to such settlements once civil wars begin. We know from our discussion above that wars can play an important information-revealing role about the relative strength of the combatants. As Filson & Werner (2002, p. 820) observe, "war itself provides the information necessary for disputants to reach a settlement and to end the war."[11] Information, however, is not likely to be revealed at the same rate in all conflicts. The speed at which a settlement is reached depends, in part, on how much information the war is able to uncover about different characteristics of the combatants over time. Two types of civil war are likely to be particularly slow at providing clear data about each of the combatants: (*a*) guerrilla wars and (*b*) wars with multiple factions.

Guerrilla wars. If a war is fought using unconventional methods such as guerrilla or terrorist tactics, or is characterized by many starts and stops, it takes longer to expose the true nature of rebel strength and resolve than if it were fought using more observable conventional means. The U.S. government, for example, collected far more information about the conventional Confederate Army in four years of war than the Colombian government has collected on the FARC in >40 years. Similarly, governments fighting wars against opponents who operate from remote regions or foreign base camps, or within large sympathetic populations, are likely to find it far more difficult to obtain reliable information about these groups than governments fighting rebels who operate in areas that are easy to access and patrol (see Salehyan 2007, 2009). The more difficult it is to ascertain the true strength of a rebel organization, the longer a war is likely to last.

Multiple, shifting factions. Cunningham (2006) offers a second reason why information may take longer to reveal in some civil wars than others. Some wars, such as Cambodia's civil war in the 1970s and the current war in Iraq, include multiple competing factions and a large number of outside actors that make it more difficult to locate a common bargaining range. Not only must a greater amount of information be collected before a mutually agreeable settlement can be reached, but the information that is collected may become obsolete as new alliances are formed. This is not the case in wars fought between a smaller number of parties with limited intervention from outside players.

Both of these factors—the conduct of war and the number of parties—influence how rapidly combatants can agree on settlement terms and could explain why some civil wars take longer to end than others. Governments that fight unconventional wars against

[11] This observation has been confirmed empirically. Both Fearon (2004) and Regan (2002) have found that the longer a war has lasted, the more likely it is to end. This supports the idea that information is revealed during the course of fighting.

insurgents living on difficult-to-monitor terrain need more time to determine the true strength of their opponent. In addition, combatants fighting against multiple factions and outside players find it more difficult and more time consuming to reach deals that make everyone happy. The more information that needs to be collected and the harder it is to collect this information, the more time combatants need to agree on a settlement.

Commitment Problems and the Duration of Civil War

Still, information problems cannot explain cases where governments offer generous terms only to be turned down by the very rebels who demanded them. They also cannot explain why settlements are not reached in wars that drag on for many years with no new information revealed (Fearon 2004, 2007; Powell 2006). In these cases, governments appear to have enough information about their opponents to be willing to make a deal, yet war persists. The Nigerian government, for example, promised the Ibos general amnesty, offered them a fair share of employment in federal public services, and agreed that Ibos could police Ibo areas, yet these offers were consistently rejected.

Cases where generous bargains are extended but then rebuffed (as was the case in Nigeria), or where settlements are signed but not implemented (as was the case in Rwanda in 1994), suggest classic commitment problems. Even if a government becomes magnanimous as a result of war—offering all the concessions the rebels originally demanded—rebels may still walk away from a settlement if the opportunity for post-treaty exploitation exists.

Combatants in almost every civil war are likely to have difficulty designing self-enforcing peace agreements for at least two reasons. First, treaties are almost always signed during periods of government weakness. This means that as governments gain strength they will have less incentive to honor an agreement, and everyone knows this (see Fearon 2004). Second, almost all rebels will have to weather a post-treaty demobilization and reintegration period, during which they will be increasingly vulnerable to exploitation. These dual processes—the increasing strength of governments and the decreasing strength of rebels—make it difficult for governments to credibly commit to even the most munificent terms. Two types of countries are likely to have more difficulty overcoming these problems than others: (*a*) those with clear asymmetries of power and (*b*) those with no chance of third-party intervention.

Wars with a clear imbalance of power. One way governments and rebel groups can help enforce peace agreements is to divide power in a way that allows each of them to restrain the other's behavior over time. If political, military, and geographic control can be relatively equally divided between the combatants, it becomes difficult for one side to heavily exploit the other without being punished in return. But what if one side is clearly weaker when the settlement is signed or is expected to become weaker over time? If one side is weaker, this disparity will be reflected in the terms of a settlement, and mutual enforcement will become difficult. This is one of the key problems hampering negotiations in Iraq: How can anyone assure minority Sunnis that they will not be permanently shut out of government once the United States is no longer protecting them from the full force of the Shi'a government? Similarly, if one side is expected to become weaker in the future, as was the case with Christians in Lebanon or Serbs in newly independent Croatia, it is difficult for the stronger side to credibly commit to adhere to existing terms as its power grows. In both cases, the weaker party is likely to be wary of any promise to honor an agreement, and it is this party that is likely to refuse to settle.

This problem may be partially solved by offering combatants a fairly equal distribution of political and military power in any postwar government. Hartzell & Hoddie (2003) and Walter (2002) have found that peace agreements that included guarantees of political and territorial power sharing were more likely to

last than those that did not. The Dayton Peace Accords that ended the war in Bosnia divided the country into three separate zones, each controlled by one of the three groups that had fought the war. But again, such a settlement is only likely to be offered if combatants have proven themselves to be fairly equally matched on the battlefield. Negotiated settlements are also more likely to be signed after combatants have fought to a military stalemate (Walter 2002), a strong indicator of a relative balance of power between the two sides. The less equally matched the combatants in a civil war, the less equal and extensive the power-sharing arrangements are likely to be, and the less credible any commitments will be.

Countries with no possibility of third-party enforcement. Credible commitments to an agreement, however, are possible (even in highly unbalanced contests) if combatants are able to convince a third party to intervene to help enforce the terms for them.[12] Third parties can verify and monitor compliance with an agreement, provide security for combatants as they begin the transition to civilian life, and reduce incentives to cheat. The importance of third parties has been confirmed by Walter (1997, 2002), Doyle & Sambanis (2002, 2006), Fortna (2004), and Hartzell & Hoddie (2003), all of whom have found that civil wars are significantly more likely to end in a negotiated settlement if an outside state or international organization has sent peacekeepers to help with implementation.[13] The United Nations has sent peacekeepers to Cambodia, Mozambique, and El Salvador; NATO has helped enforced the decades-long Dayton Peace Accord; and the United States is likely to enforce any peace settlement reached between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Not all countries, however, are equally attractive candidates for outside assistance. In fact, two types of countries appear to have difficulty convincing any outside state or international institution to commit soldiers to their cause: (*a*) those with strong governments and large armies and (*b*) more democratic countries with higher living standards.

The past 20 years have shown that the international community, especially advanced industrialized countries, are not enthusiastic about providing peacekeeping services. In fact, a lengthy study on peacekeeping (Fortna 2008) finds that states not only resist sending peacekeepers to most civil wars, but they are especially hesitant to send peacekeepers to countries with strong governments, countries that are democratic, and countries with relatively high living standards. Similarly, Gilligan & Stedman (2003) find that United Nations peacekeepers are significantly less likely to be sent to countries with large government armies. The larger the military, the harder it is to find volunteers to play this role.

Fortna, however, did find that the international community is more likely to send peacekeepers to countries where the rebels are strong, where citizens experience low living standards, and where multiple factions are involved in the fighting. This suggests that more powerful countries are less likely to receive third-party assistance but that poorer countries with weak central governments and multiple competing factions (such as Cambodia, Iraq, or Angola) are more likely to enjoy these services.

[12] Not all types of outside intervention are helpful in ending civil wars. Regan (2002), for example, finds that economic and military assistance tends to extend the duration of a civil war, especially if both the government and rebels benefit from this aid. Balch-Lindsay & Enterline (2000) also find that civil wars are more likely to last if both the government and rebels are able to obtain help from outside supporters.

[13] What type of peacekeeping is most effective? Fortna (2004) finds that all types of peacekeeping missions have a significant effect on the duration of the postwar peace. Doyle & Sambanis (2002, 2006), however, find that not all types of peacekeeping operations are equally effective. They find that a particular type of outside intervention—multidimensional United Nations peacekeeping that includes extensive civilian functions, economic reconstruction, institutional reform, and election oversight—is significantly and positively associated with 2–5 years of postwar peace.

This discussion about commitment problems suggests that countries where the combatants are not evenly matched, and countries whose civil wars will not attract the attention of the international community, are likely to experience particularly long wars that are unlikely to end in negotiated settlements. In the absence of third parties willing to guarantee the safety of the combatants during the demobilization period, and domestic political checks on each other's behavior once the third party leaves, even the most generous settlements are likely to fail.

EXPLAINING WHY SOME CIVIL WARS RECUR AND OTHERS DO NOT

A final puzzle surrounding civil wars is what scholars call the "conflict trap" (see Collier & Sambanis 2002). Almost a third of all countries that have experienced one civil war experience additional civil wars.[14] Indonesia, Iraq, Burundi, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Iran, for example, have all experienced recurring civil wars in which violence broke out repeatedly over time. One reason wars are likely to recur is that fighting exacerbates many of the underlying economic, political, and social factors that encouraged war in the first place. Studies by Elbadawi & Sambanis (2002) and Walter (2004), for example, have found that high infant mortality rates and low levels of wealth in the aftermath of one war are significantly related to the introduction of a second war.[15] Civil war tends to reduce already low levels of income and economic growth, and to leave a country with a government that is even more predisposed to challenge.

But low levels of wealth and low quality of life are not sufficient to explain the large variation in recurring war across cases. Again, most countries that experience civil war tend to be poor, and most emerge from civil war at least as poor as they started, yet most countries (64%) escape this trap. Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were all devastated by civil war, yet all have managed to avoid a second civil war. Why are some combatants able to maintain the peace while others are not? The final subsection outlines some ways in which continuing problems with information and commitment may contribute to civil war recurrence.

Information Problems and the Postwar Peace

Whether a country experiences a second civil war is likely to depend, in part, on the quality and amount of information combatants received about each other in the first war. This information is likely to depend on at least two factors: (*a*) the duration of the first war and (*b*) its outcome. The longer the first war lasts, the more information combatants are likely to collect about each other, and the better able they will be to resolve any new or lingering disputes. In addition, the more decisive the outcome, the more reliable the information combatants have about their relative capabilities and the more incentives there will be to remain at peace.

Short wars = less information. Studies by Doyle & Sambanis (2002), Hartzell et al. (2001), Walter (2004), Fortna (2004), and Dubey (2004) have all found that the duration of a civil war is significantly related to the postwar peace. The longer the first war, the more opportunity combatants had to gather information, and the better able they are to correctly calculate the risks and costs of future wars.

Decisive military victories = more information. A similar relationship has been found between decisive military victories and the renewed use of violence. Civil wars that end in

[14]This estimate is contestable. The rate of recurring civil war is difficult to estimate because one must distinguish between new civil wars and civil wars that move in and out of violent phases.

[15]These studies also found that a country's postwar economic development, its postwar level of democracy, and the presence of outside peacekeepers in the aftermath of war had a significant effect on civil war renewal.

decisive military victories tend to deliver significantly longer periods of peace than those that ended in negotiated settlements. Looking at all civil wars between 1945 and 1993, Licklider (1995) finds that 50% of negotiated settlements broke down into renewed war, in contrast to only 15% of decisive military victories. This is confirmed by Dubey (2004) and Fortna (2004), who also find that decisive military outcomes in one civil war significantly reduce the likelihood of another (see also Toft 2006).

Information problems associated with negotiated settlements help explain why decisive victories tend to be more stable. Wars that end decisively provide combatants with clearer information about each side's relative capabilities than those that end in negotiated settlements. A party decisively defeated in one war is likely to have few doubts about the outcome of a second war with the same opponent. Moreover, the relative strength of the two parties is likely to become even clearer in the aftermath of a decisive outcome because the victor almost always gains full control over the state (Zartman 1989, 1995; Wagner 2000). In a negotiated settlement, the distribution of power between the two camps is less obvious, and the settlement itself tends to rearrange or redistribute resources even further. The process by which one war comes to an end, therefore, can provide an enormous amount of information about how a second or third war is likely to end.

There is a second reason, however, why negotiated settlements might be more prone to renewed war than decisive military victories. Negotiated settlements also provide information about a government's willingness to compromise with rebel groups, signaling to potential challengers that rebellion is likely to be rewarded with a deal. Groups that observe the government accommodating one rebel group may be encouraged to launch their own challenge, causing a second, different war (hence the incentive for governments to build a reputation for toughness, discussed earlier in this article). A study by Walter (2006b) confirms that governments that grant concessions to one ethnic separatist group are significantly more likely to face demands for self-determination from other ethnic groups.

Werner (1999) offers a third reason why parties that reach negotiated settlements might be more apt to experience renewed war. Werner rightly points out that the terms of any peace settlement tend to reflect the relative balance of power at the time of settlement. Yet relative power almost always changes over time. For settlements to remain lasting and legitimate, therefore, they need to evolve to reflect societal changes or else additional resistance will emerge. Overly inflexible peace agreements that fail to adjust to changes in demographics (as was the case in Lebanon before 1975) or agreements that exclude important parties from the deal (as occurred in Colombia in 1958) will eventually be challenged.

Commitment Problems and the Postwar Peace

The main reason decisive military victories lead to longer periods of peace is that they solve otherwise difficult commitment problems. The victor simply implements its favored policies. Negotiated settlements, in contrast, leave the former combatants with the challenge of enforcing the terms over time. This means that settlements are highly sensitive to any changes in relative power that may occur after a war is fought, and such changes are quite common in these highly unstable transition periods. As the balance of power between two former combatants evolves, the stronger side may unilaterally renege on the agreement or demand better terms, or the weaker side may preemptively renege in an attempt to protect itself from future exploitation. The 1972 agreement to end the civil war in Sudan, for example, broke down in 1983 when the government reneged on its promise not to institute Sharia law.

Not all conflicts that end in negotiated settlements, however, are equally vulnerable to treaty breakdown. Commitment problems are more likely to emerge in countries where no third party has offered to help with the

transition, or where peacekeepers were inadequate (e.g., they failed to arrive, they were too few to offer a credible force, or they left before the military and political transitions were complete). Combatants who attempt to implement peace agreements under these conditions are far more likely to experience renewed civil war than those who obtain more robust third-party assistance with implementation.

CONCLUSION

By focusing on bargaining problems, this article reveals why more negotiated settlements are not reached and implemented in conflicts that occur within states. Disputants who wish to end their conflict in a negotiated settlement need to reach mutually acceptable settlements in environments that are often information poor. They then need to design enforceable contracts in situations where few mechanisms exist to check behavior, especially the behavior of the central government. The result is a strategic situation that often encourages violence at the expense of peaceful cooperation.

The article, however, also reveals why some countries are more susceptible to bargaining problems than others. Some governments have less information owing to the types of rebels they face and the limits on their efforts to collect information. Governments that face guerrilla organizations, many competing factions, or difficult terrain are likely to be more uncertain about their adversary than governments that do not. Governments with highly fragmented populations also have greater incentives to signal toughness, making fighting more likely. Finally, civil wars that are short and those that end in negotiated settlements leave the combatants at greater risk of further information asymmetries and commitment problems. All of these features are likely to reduce the likelihood of successful bargaining and increase the chances of war.

Negotiated settlements are also more difficult in countries where credible commitments are difficult to craft. These include countries with weak political institutions, fixed cleavages, and rapidly changing demographics. They also include countries where one combatant is clearly weaker than the other and will continue to be weaker over time, and states that are too large and powerful to attract critical peacekeepers. These countries are the ones that are likely to have little choice but to use violence to resolve their differences.

This article is an exercise in theory building. I have drawn arguments about bargaining and civil war from the literature, added new ones, and attempted to build a coherent and inclusive bargaining theory of civil war. Still, significantly more work is needed to develop these ideas and then test the individual hypotheses. This article looks in detail at only a few sources of information problems. A host of additional factors determine how strong and resolute players are likely to be, such as how much pain each side is willing to bear, the quality of each side's military leadership, the potential alliances that may emerge, the ability of players to innovate and collect intelligence, and each side's courage, determination, and toughness. Additional theorizing is needed, not only on the ways in which combatants determine each other's "strength," but also on the relative merits of withholding information at some times and not others.

Existing arguments on credible commitments do not fully explore how combatants can find creative ways to credibly commit to different types of agreements. One wonders if there really is no way for combatants to self-enforce their own peace agreements, especially given the costs they must pay for failure. Why can't each side hold the other hostage by placing large sums of money in escrow or allowing both sides to retain militias stationed in each other's territories? My hunch is that disputants are able to come up with creative ways to enforce terms but that these solutions are often not observed by outsiders because these are the disputes that are settled quietly and out of the public eye. Part of the answer may be found in the many disputes that are resolved without the two sides going to war. To date, studies of intrastate conflict have focused disproportionately on the cases where violence breaks out (Sambanis 2005 is

an exception). Careful research into these less well-known and less public disputes is likely to reveal a variety of different commitment strategies and the innovative ways disputants have found to design and enforce their own agreements.

Finally, the hypotheses presented throughout this article take us back to the empirical findings presented on page one. Recall the reports that poverty, large population, concentrated population, a low level of economic development, a prior history of civil war, political instability, and rough terrain are all associated with the outbreak of civil war. One of the interesting observations to emerge from this article is how many of these factors are associated with information and commitment problems. Based on the hypotheses presented in this article, a government should have an easier time collecting information about potential rivals in wealthy countries with small populations, and in countries with high levels of development and easy-to-navigate terrain. A government will also be able to make more credible commitments if it has not already fought a civil war, and if it enjoys relatively stable and legitimate political institutions. These are the same measures that Collier & Hoeffler and Fearon & Laitin claimed supported their own theories regarding greed and opportunity. It is possible that grievances, greed, and opportunity are the reasons each of these factors is associated with a higher incidence of civil war. But it is also possible that these factors are proxies for the bargaining problems outlined in this article. The next big task for researchers therefore is to collect the data necessary to disaggregate which of these causal logics is actually driving governments and domestic groups to go to war, and the degree to which strategic and nonstrategic factors are influencing parties at each stage in these conflicts.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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Annual Review of
Political Science
Volume 12, 2009

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