



*The Future in the Past: Victory, Defeat, and Grand Strategy in the US, UK,
France and Germany*
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Summary

The central argument of this dissertation is that victory and defeat in war shape the post-war grand strategies of states, and specifically their willingness to use of force and diplomacy. The book examines this argument through the central case of the Second World War and the experiences and the post-war strategic behaviour of its belligerents. It focuses on four cases in particular: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany.

War is often assumed to have a strong effect on post-war beliefs and behaviour, for both intuitive reasons as well as arguments found in existing scholarly research, yet understanding exactly how and why is difficult. The existing research includes the literatures on collective memory, on the use of analogies during decision-making, and on war-weariness and contagion. These point out that wars are invoked as lessons to highlight and dissect normative questions, to understand new crises and challenges, and they are used to attack political opponents. We are reminded that displaying weakness to authoritarian opponents is as morally wrong and ineffective as when Britain and France appeased Hitler in Munich. The Holocaust is the standard that to judge the evil of racism, and the National Socialism offers a warning of the dangers of where too great a belief in leaders will lead us to. Images of the trenches of the First World War connote the senselessness of war and how wrong-headed policymakers sacrifice soldiers for poorly thought-out plans, as do invocations of Vietnamese jungles. Similarly, to the anti-war movements, the more recent invasion of Iraq underlines that we should distrust policymakers. Past wars therefore become powerful symbols that echo in the present. They are considered to impact the national psyche and to transform collective understanding of the nation. They are reflected in and passed on through high and low culture. Wars become common reference points to demark eras into a before and after, where the lessons of the old era become the basis for the new era. They can either underline what we already believe about ourselves or cause us to question these beliefs. Victory in war shows that good can be accomplished through the use of force. In contrast, death and destruction are sobering, both for policymakers and societies. The costs of war will therefore make states more cautious. However, while such arguments about war make strong intuitive sense it is inherently difficult to study them due to the intangibility of ideas and their causal role in the calculations of policymakers. How can we show this role vis-à-vis multiple rival explanations? The book attempts to address these problems.

The Second World War offers an exemplary case to explore these ideas. The brutality of the war cast a long shadow over all belligerent states in Europe, America, and Asia. Yet, wartime experiences still strongly varied between states. Some states not only lost massive numbers of citizens, but also experienced the humiliation and shame of military defeat, surrender, occupation, collaboration, or even the responsibility for genocide. Other states, in contrast, neither experienced invasion or occupation, and their casualties, however terrible, were mostly military in nature. Moreover, the costs of war were more than morally justified by the need to defeat two powerful and genocidal regimes. For other states, most of them, the experiences were more mixed and ambiguous. They fought and came out on the winning side, but at significant costs, often suffering huge numbers of civilian and military casualties, occupation, and the moral ambiguity of collaboration.

This dissertation argues that the range of experiences explains a range of policy outcomes and it focuses in particular on the four major western states: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Since the end of the war all four states have been liberal democracies with considerable political, military, and economic capabilities, yet they have had strikingly different experiences with war in the first half of the twentieth century. The United States and the United Kingdom were the victors of the Second World War. Yet, Britain suffered high societal costs and the post-war collapse of its empire, while victory was nearly cost-free for the US and allowed it to become a superpower. Nominally one of the victorious states, France suffered a sudden military defeat in the opening stages of the war, and was forced to depend on others for the restoration of national sovereignty. Germany in turn was completely defeated militarily and discredited morally as the horrors of the Holocaust became known; it remained occupied after the war; and (West) Germany was rebuilt as a democracy by the occupying powers. Or, put in another way, the case studies allow variation through two extreme cases – the US and Germany – and two more difficult and ambiguous cases – the UK and France.

These cases are important in their own right: the policies of the four major Western states laid the foundations for the global multilateral order as we now know it. Yet, each of the four seems to have specific national patterns of behaviour that are widely divergent when it comes to matters of using military force and sovereignty in international diplomacy.

The book explores and tests the argument that victory and defeat shape post-war behaviour through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. This includes regression analysis using different measures of wartime defeat and loss together with various measures of the post-war use of force and diplomacy for all the participants of the Second World War. However, the greatest part of the research focuses on the four case studies – the US, UK, France, and Germany – through historical analysis, counterfactual thought experiments, content analysis of documents, and a series of fifty interviews with American, British, French, and German policymakers. From this variety of methods, the research produces the following findings.

The first of the book's findings is that experiences with war shape the propensity of victorious and defeated states to use force and diplomacy in their grand strategy, and that this effect takes place regardless of their relative material capabilities, alignments, and regime types. The results of the regression analysis for the experiences in the Second World War and post-war behaviour are clear. States that had experienced occupation and surrender, had aggressed, fought on the losing side, and had suffered high numbers of casualties, were significantly less likely to use force or threaten the use of force, and more likely to be a member of international organisations or use diplomatic representation than states that had been victorious and suffered few civilian and military casualties. In contrast, the states that had been victorious in war become more willing to again use force after the war, and less likely to use diplomacy. Moreover, a convincing victory in a total war is more important than a smaller defeat in a limited war. Victories and defeat also lead to different combinations of diplomacy and force, suggesting that to some extent policymakers see diplomacy and force as exchangeable alternatives. The case studies further support this first finding, and show that the beliefs of American, British, French, and German policymakers on force and diplomacy - and the relations between state, society, and the armed forces - reinforce each other in their effect on their respective behaviour.

The second finding is that the experiences with victory and defeat have distinct implications for the perspectives, legitimacy, and institutional influence of the actors involved in the development and implementation of national strategy. The actors within the nation-state involved in the making of grand strategy are grouped as follows: its civilian policymakers; its military policymakers; and its civilians. The relations between this 'trinity' of state, society, and armed forces define whose strategic beliefs can more heavily shape policy. This explains why beliefs are maintained over multiple decades, and why not every victory and defeat matter equally – blame and credit be accorded differently and some ideas therefore barely change. The combinations of beliefs and relations lead to nationally distinct patterns of strategic behaviour that endure long after the initial experiences, despite changes in the international environment and turnover in domestic governments.

As the two extreme cases, the US and Germany best illustrate how changes in strategic beliefs and domestic distribution of influence and legitimacy reinforce each other. The US victory in the Second World War strengthened the position of civilian and military policymakers. As it also came at relatively low costs - the US did not suffer civilian casualties or even, relatively speaking, large numbers of military casualties –

American policymakers did not need to make a great effort at domestic mobilisation for the war effort. So, while American grand strategy had become ambitious after the war and made the use of force more likely by itself, American civilian and military policymakers also had greater autonomy to actually use force. Moreover, they used references to the past, such as Munich, to defend forceful policies in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, and other cases. Vietnam temporarily undermined the legitimacy of the state in the use of force, but post-Vietnam victim narrative surrounding the armed forces de facto strengthened the US military's autonomy, as did the victory in the Gulf War.

In contrast, not only had German total defeat in the Second World War already led to a drastic change in the post-war core beliefs of German policymakers and of the public at large, but the defeat also delegitimised the pre-war, traditional dominance of the German military and the executive. In post-war Germany, both the executive and the armed forces are therefore highly constrained within the national security institutions and this further limits the ability to decisively use force.

The two more ambiguous cases show more particular effects of experiences with war. The British victory in the Second World War, in contrast to that of the US, came at great social cost. The Conservatives were associated both with appeasement as well as with the successful leadership of Churchill, while Labour was credited with running the war at home, personified in the popular myth of the 'people's war'. The executive was therefore differently empowered, creating a populist myth with a central role for strong leadership. The victory in the Falklands ensured the continuation of Churchillian myth after the Suez fiasco, sustained an exceptionalist attitude towards the European continent, and reinvigorated the sense of a particular British moral responsibility in international affairs.

An even more complex experience was that of France. The humiliating French defeat in the Second World War was blamed on pre-war divisions between the political Left and Right that had impeded effective military innovation and integration with French alliance strategy. It was only the founding of the Fifth Republic and the return to power of De Gaulle that largely resolved the political tensions of twentieth century France. The post-war consensus that took hold after the exit from Algeria established the French President as the legitimate sole custodian of his 'reserved domain' of foreign and defence policy. That executive autonomy has allowed the French state to use force and diplomacy decisively and coherently in pursuit of French autonomy and security.

The third and final finding is that experiences with war shape not just the willingness to use force and diplomacy in general, but also what policymakers believe should be the specific composition of military and diplomatic means. These core beliefs have to do with whether policymakers believe they live in a balance of threat or a balance of power world, and how states rely on military capabilities (internal balancing) and alliances (external balancing). In this manner, they together shape the quality, direction, and cohesion of the nation-state's strategy, as the four cases show

American policymakers suffered from a sense of vulnerability after the sudden collapse of Europe in 1940 and the surprise attack of Pearl Harbor in 1941. Maintaining the balance of power was insufficient as Europeans were unable to resist authoritarian states, or were prone to be seduced by extremist ideology. This created a state of permanent insecurity that led American policymakers to avoid a return to so-called isolationism at all costs. Instead they pursued US leadership and accepted entangling alliances. American policymakers established a permanent military presence in Europe and Asia, and maintained it after the Cold War. These beliefs guided decisions on not passing of the costs for European security to the Europeans and led to American involvement in peripheral conflicts such as Vietnam. As illustrated through counterfactual thought experiments, these choices were remarkable as this represented arguably a more costly and risky strategy for the US should the Cold War have escalated, but also once the Cold War ended, when the US was clearly no longer facing an existential threat.

The traditional British tendency to rely on off-shore balancing to maintain a continental balance of power, no longer sufficed after British policymakers failed to prevent the fall of Europe to Germany in 1940. During the Cold War, the UK committed itself to the continent through the NATO alliance and by placing permanently prepositioned forces in Europe, rather than relying on a national nuclear weapon. British policymakers still considered the UK as exceptional to the continent due to its unconquered status, though dependent on its 'special relationship' with the US, and especially after Suez. As a result, the UK overextended its forces beyond its financial resources and risked entanglement in American policies, despite the availability of less risky and costly alternative strategies.

The sudden and catastrophic defeat in June 1940 transformed French strategic thinking on diplomacy and force. Wartime experiences had cast doubts on the reliability of France's Anglo-American allies. French policymakers had not adapted to the changes in military technology and prepared for armoured warfare. After the war, France therefore sought to avoid dependence on others at all costs, and specifically on the US. General De Gaulle specifically perceived the NATO alliance as merely entangling France without actually securing it, as the American nuclear deterrent could not offer credible protection. French policymakers therefore pursued an autonomous national deterrent at great cost. The resulting French grand strategy risked alienating the US and undermining the protection that the US-led Atlantic alliance provided for France, precisely when France needed the US the most.

Germany offers the greatest contrast between its pre- and post-war strategies. In both the First and the Second World War, German policymakers had avoided alliances and relied on an extremely offensive force posture to ensure German survival against encirclement by perceived threats to its East and its West. Germany's total defeat during the Second World War reversed those beliefs. To avoid renewed isolation, German policymakers embedded Germany as deeply as possible in NATO and the European institutions, and adopted a highly defensive force posture. Even after the end of the Cold War, German policymakers did not pursue an alternative strategy in which they attempted again to become the preeminent power in Europe. Germany's experiences with Ostpolitik, European unification, and the French-German bilateral relationship confirmed German faith in multilateral solutions.

In all four cases, these beliefs and others based on the national experience with the Second World War were and are reiterated in policy documents, speeches, and in interviews with policymakers.

Through its comprehensive methodological approach, the book can make two important contributions. The first contribution is to the literature on the legacies of wars, where wars are often assumed to have an impact – though collective memory, the use of analogy, or war-weariness and contagion – but the exact impact on policymakers long-term choices remains unclear. The book's argument shows how and why such experiences shape the beliefs, and of which actors, as well as the manner in which they are reinforced or undermined by later conflicts.

The second contribution is to the literature on the origins of grand strategy and the role of beliefs in relation to domestic institutions, international structures, and material power. That argument constitutes an elaborated theory of neoclassical realism: experience-driven realism. Experience-driven realism theorises how the outcomes of wars shape both national strategic beliefs and relations between state, society, and the armed forces. The combinations of beliefs and domestic relations in turn shape the strategic behaviour of states within the structural features of the international environment. It offers an argument on when and why grand strategy remains consistent and when and why it changes.

The story of this book is therefore also more than a tale about how analogical thinking might matter for political life. It points to larger differences in beliefs on both sides of the Atlantic that derive from experiences with wars and that continue to persist.

The argument made in this book is important for anyone who cares about the perceived lessons of national experience and the implications for contemporary policy. While we are not bound to the past, how we understand it strongly defines our approach to the future. There is a real danger if policy is calibrated on some mythical sense of the past. Strategy involves matching ends and means; by definition there are no benign biases in strategic thinking, specifically if one is unaware of them. An unconsidered reticence or principled opposition to the use of force may be as troubling as an unconsidered enthusiasm towards war. Both 'always Munich' and 'never again war' are bad models of foreign policy. Overresponding to Iraq in 2003 was as poor an idea as not responding strongly in the Ukraine Crisis in 2014, or to the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2014.

In terms of international threats and challenges, the coming decades are certain to be more different for the US, the UK, France, and Germany than any era since 1945, whether due to a more and more unstable Middle East, a resurgent Russia, or a rising China. There is the danger of applying lessons from the West's past too broadly, and of failing to understand that the world is different or not to accept the manner in which it is different. The roads not already taken will be overlooked, and the future might repeat the past for reasons both tragic and avoidable.