Do Positive Illusions Promote War?

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"Always remember, however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance."

Winston Churchill [1]

"To read the classic texts of international relations theory, one would never suspect that human beings have right brains as well as left; that in addition to being selfish, they also love, hate, hope, and despair; that they sometimes act not out of interest, but out of courage, politeness, or rage."

David A. Welch [2]

1. SUMMARY

1. International conflict is often characterised by two opponents sharing the belief they can win. Usually, of course, one of them is wrong.

2. I suggest that this may be, in part, explained by actors holding "positive illusions" of their capabilities, a cognitive phenomenon of over-optimism well-documented in empirical psychology. This is not 'just another cognitive bias' to add to the literature, since it has an unusually strong theoretical foundation in evolutionary biology and the anthropology of war.

3. Richard Wrangham recently proposed that positive illusions are *adaptive* because inflated assessments of winning probability (through overestimation of one's own ability and/or underestimation of the enemy) can promote success in conflict, either by increasing resolve or by bluffing the opponent.[3] The advantages of either mechanism could have led to the natural selection of positive illusions as a hard-wired trait during human evolution.

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[1] W. Reed and D.H. Clark, "War initiators and war winners: The consequences of linking theories of democratic war success," *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* Vol. 44, No. 3 (2000), pp. 378-395, p. 378.
[2] David A. Welch, *Justice and the Genesis of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 3.
[3] Richard W. Wrangham, "Is Military Incompetence Adaptive?," *Evolution and Human Behaviour,* Vol. 20 (1999), pp. 3-17.

4. The consequence, today, would be that human brains remain prone to harbouring positive illusions about the likelihood of winning conflicts. This increases the probability of a resort to violent means to settle a conflict even if the odds of winning are low.

5. Positive illusions have thus been argued to be a novel explanation for military incompetence on the battlefield.[4]

6. More important, however, is the potential effect that positive illusions would have in the wider realm of international relations, and the initiation of entire wars themselves. In this paper, I present the positive illusions theory, discuss whether it is likely to have a significant effect on international conflict, cite some (cursory and non-systematic) empirical evidence in support, and briefly consider the contexts under which they would be suppressed or exacerbated.

2. INTRODUCTION

On November 16th 1532, the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizzaro and his modest force of 168 men routed an Inca army of 80,000 soldiers and captured their king, Atahuallpa in front of their eyes. Despite the incredible asymmetry in manpower, the Spaniards apparently won due to superior weaponry and the effects of surprise at the novelty of canon, horses and trumpets.[5] But the more bizarre mystery is what led the conquistadors to believe in the first place that it would be possible to win in the face of such enormous adversity. (There are accounts of the whole valley being full of Inca soldiers, filing out of their huge encampment for most of the morning.) A Spanish eye-witness wrote that having arrived, they could not turn back, or show fear, as it would have exposed a belief that they could not win. Pizzaro had complemented his force's morale by telling them that there were 'only' 40,000 Inca soldiers anyway. It seems as though they were determined to maintain the belief that they expected to win. Another example comes from one of Napoleon's marshals, Philibert Sérurier, who "had an uneventful career except for one dramatic moment during Napoleon's campaign in northern Italy in 1796. French troops were pinned down by the Austrians and suffering casualties, when Sérurier suddenly jumped on his horse, drew his sword, and charged straight at the enemy."[6] The significant part of this story is the result: apparently the enemy "fled in panic."

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[4] Dominic D.P. Johnson, Richard W. Wrangham and Stephen P. Rosen, "Is Military Incompetence Adaptive? An Empirical Test with Risk-Raking Behaviour in Modern Warfare," *Evolution & Human Behaviour*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2002), pp. 245-264; Wrangham, "Is Military Incompetence Adaptive?"

[5] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (London: Vintage, 1998), see chapter 3, "Collision at Cajamarca." The Spaniards had only a single canon, and only 12 guns (even these were early harquebuses, which were difficult to load and fire.)

[6] David Rooney, *Military Mavericks: Extraordinary Men of Battle* (London: Cassell & Co., 1999), p. 209.

Pizzaro and Sérurier were apparently served well by their confidence. Often, however, such confident evaluations bring disaster instead. For example, a Frankish Knight adopted the Sérurier tactic and charged into a sea of Saracens at the battle of Acre in 1291, even though his compatriots had already turned and fled. In this instance, however, he did not re-emerge. These are just anecdotes, but when one looks more systematically, there is a vast literature on the all too many ill-fated decisions to attack, with insufficient forces, what were clearly formidable opponents (this has been called 'military incompetence').[7] Of course, there are many reasons why even knowingly weaker sides will choose to get embroiled in combat, such as being cornered, defending against attack, being a sacrificial pawn in an overarching strategy and so on.[8] Nevertheless, "the most superficial acquaintance with the past quickly yields a rich crop of professional incompetents who led or ordered their followers into the jaws of disaster in pursuit of what hindsight shows to have been an unlikely success."[9] It is the origin of this optimism that is the subject of my paper.

Norman Dixon argued that military incompetence was a result of the way in which military institutions imbue certain pro-action characteristics into their officers.[10] But as Barbara Tuchman has made clear, incompetence of this type - poor assessment of relative capabilities - is not limited to the military.[11] There are numerous examples of overconfidence bringing catastrophe in a diversity of professional contexts; throughout the world's cultures; over all of recorded human history; and from the battlefield decisions of military commanders to political group decision-making with the benefit of excellent intelligence. It does not, therefore, appear to be an artefact of particular modern or even military institutions.

Perhaps, then, it is something more fundamental about human behaviour. Was Pizzaro's confidence similar to that of Israeli Chief of Staff David Elazar, four centuries later, saying of the Syrian forces (ten days before the 1973 Yom Kippur war), "we'll have one hundred tanks against their eight hundred ... That ought to be enough;"[12] or the American officer who told his colleague

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[7] Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976); Richard Gabriel, *Military Incompetence: Why the American Military Doesn't Win* (New York: Noonday Press, 1986); Geoffrey Regan, *Someone Had Blundered: A Historical Survey of Military Incompetence*. (London: B.T. Batsford, 1987); Saul David, *Military Blunders: The How and Why of Military Failure* (London: Robinson, 1997); A. Perlmutter, "Military incompetence and failure: A historical comparative and analytical evaluation," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 1 (1978): 121-138; J.M. Perry, *Arrogant Armies: Great Military Disasters and the Generals Behind Them* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996).

[8] One can of course imagine many others. See James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," *International Organization* Vol. 49 (1995): 379-414.

[9] Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), p. 6.

[10] Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*.

[11] Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); See also Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, on this point.

[12] Baylis Thomas, *How Israel Was Won: A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Oxford: Lexington, 1999), p. 199.

not to worry about the blips on a radar screen at Pearl Harbor in 1941;[13] or General Custer's cry, "Hurrah, boys, we've got them!" after which his entire force of 675 men was annihilated by what he had been reliably informed would be 3,000 Indians (Custer had reported this figure to his officers as only 1,500!);[14] or the American Civil War officer, John Sedgwick, who declared "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance," immediately prior to being killed by enemy fire at the battle of Spotsylvania in May 1864.[15]

Are these isolated cases of arrogance? Or is overconfidence a common enough feature of history that it may be an important explanatory factor in understanding the systematic tendency of human societies to accept the great risks and consequences of war fighting? Various authors, echoing our opening quote from Churchill, suggest that the latter is true. Robert Jervis found that "Excessive military optimism is frequently associated with the outbreak of war."[16] Geoffrey Blainey argued that "Wars usually begin when two nations disagree on their relative strength," and that "All combatants tend to have inflated expectations of victory, particularly strong actors in asymmetric conflicts."[17] Dixon found an "unrealistic over-confidence in rapid victory" to be a "notable feature of the Boer War, of the First World War, of the Second World War and even, through what was by now a quite extraordinary incapacity to profit from experience, of the Suez crisis and Bay of Pigs fiasco."[18] There is also accumulating evidence of unrealistic expectations in Vietnam,[19] the Falklands,[20] Somalia,[21] Kosovo[22] and, according to some authors, Iraq in 2002.[23] A US Department of Defense report judged that expectations were greater than they should have been in 19 out of 20 recent US interventions.[24] The logic has been extended even to the complexities of nuclear war: "The probability that a war will start is increased if two groups each believe that they can win the war. This is true regardless of weapons and their magnitude."[25] It seems that when humans are faced with important decisions "we compensate for our inability to

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[13] Geoffrey Regan, *Geoffrey Regan's Book of Military Blunders* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2001).

[14] David, *Military Blunders*, p. 236 - 251.

[15] Sherrin, N., ed. 1995. *The Oxford Dictionary of Humorous Quotations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (originally from Robert E. Denney, *The Civil War Years* (1992)).

[16] Robert O. Jervis, "War and Misperception," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 675-700, p. 676.

[17] Geoffrey A. Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 246.

[18] Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, p. 45.

[19] Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Vintage, 1996); Tuchman, The March of Folly; Colin Powell, *A Soldier's Way* (London: Hutchinson, 1995).

[20] Nigel West, *The Secret War for the Falklands: The SAS, MI6, and the War Whitehall Nearly Lost* (London: Warner, 1997).

[21] Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down* (London: Corgi, 1999).

[22] Adam Roberts, "NATO's humanitarian war over Kosovo," *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 102-123.

[23] 'War in Iraq seen as quick win' *The Washington Times* (18 September 2002); Karen J. Alter, 'Is 'groupthink' driving us to war?' *The Boston Globe* (21 September 2002).

[24] Richard Wrangham, pers. comm. [still trying to track the original report down.]

[25] Speech by Harold Urey, an early nuclear engineer, cited in William Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma: John von Neumann, Game Theory and the Puzzle of the Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 137.

foretell ... by asserting positively just what the consequences will be."[26] When two opponents are on the brink of war, their combined probability estimate of winning is often greater than 1 (e.g., both think they have an 0.8 chance of winning),[27] which is impossible. From where does this illusive bias towards optimism come?

2.1. Enter biology

It turns out that 'positive illusions' is a phenomenon long documented in the psychology literature, and has replicated in a wide variety of contexts.[28] The accumulating evidence demonstrates that "most people exhibit positive illusions in three important domains: (a) They view themselves in unrealistically positive terms; (b) they believe they have greater control over environmental events than is actually the case; and (c) they hold views of the future that are more rosy than base-rate data can justify." [29] This is not a quirk of certain experiments or certain people, "studies uniformly find that normal adults are optimistic."[30] Moreover, the positive illusions bias is now considered a standard component of being a mentally healthy individual.[31] As positive illusions are relative (i.e. comparisons of self to others), it is important to realise that they predict both overestimation of oneself *and* underestimation of others. The potential ramifications of positive illusions for rational choice and political decision-making are very great indeed, yet remain to be investigated.

The idea that traits inherent to human biology influence decision-making is now well established. Systematic deviations from the predictions of traditional rational choice theory have been discovered in a number of different contexts (mainly by experimental economists and psychologists). These biases are thought to originate in the way that the brain has been wired up during our evolution (hardware constraints, as it were), and the heuristic rules that people use to make decisions within these constraints (customized software, as it were).[32] Deviations from

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[26] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash, 1929* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p.109.

[27] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war."

[28] Shelley E. Taylor, "Positive illusions." In *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, edited by H. S. Friedman. (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1998); Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Shelley E. Taylor and J.D. Brown, "Illusion and well-being: a social psychological perspective on mental health," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 103 (1988), pp. 193-210. These authors have recently restated the robustness of their position after reviewing the evidence that has been published since the early work on positive illusions, which includes 250 publications. See Shelley E. Taylor & Jonathon D. Brown (1994) "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact From Fiction." *Psychological Bulletin* 116, 21-27.

[29] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited", p. 22.

[30] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited", p. 26.

[31] Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind*.

[32] See, for example, Margaret G. Hermann, *Political Psychology* (San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979); Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Judgement under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases," *Science*, Vol. 185, (1996), pp. 1124-1131; Herbert Simon, "Human nature in politics: the dialogue of psychology with political science," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79 (1985),

rationality are relatively consistent across cultures, so they are not oddities of western culture.[33] Many of these biases also tie in with new research findings on the processes of neurobiology and endocrinology.[34] Despite these advances, the idea that such knowledge can be translated into a new understanding of international relations is relatively new and much under appreciated.[35]

I propose the hypothesis that international conflict may be elevated because of the human tendency to exhibit overly positive illusions of themselves, their in-group, and their capabilities, which leads to an exaggerated assessment of their relative superiority in potential conflicts. This increases the chance of two sides both believing that they can win, and thus that both willingly go to war. This therefore offers a novel approach to the 'central puzzle of war':

> "On close inspection none of the principal rationalist arguments [for war] advanced in the literature holds up as an explanation because none addresses or adequately resolves the central puzzle, namely, that war is costly and risky, so rational states should have incentives to locate negotiated settlements that all would prefer to the gamble of war. The common flaw of the standard rationalist argument is that they fail either to address or to explain adequately what prevents leaders from reaching *ex ante* (prewar) bargains that would avoid the costs and risks of fighting. A coherent rationalist explanation for war must do more than give reasons why armed conflict might appear an attractive option to a rational leader under some circumstances – it must show why states are unable to locate an alternative outcome that both would prefer to a fight."[36]

Positive illusions may account for only *part* of the explanation in any one case (or only an important part in a few cases), but it nevertheless remains an undeveloped issue for study and a potential reason why state leaders overestimate the probability of victory (and thus prefer war to prewar negotiated settlement). Before positive illusions were ever talked about, Robert Jervis already exposed how overconfident assessments from miscalculations will directly impact on international relations through false perceptions of one's power, of the enemy, or of intelligence information.[37] Positive illusions actually *predict* that overconfident assessments will be an underlying base-rate tendency in cognitive processing.

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pp. 293-304; J.H. Barkow L. Cosmides and J. Tooby, eds. *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[33] J. Henrich R. Boyd S. Bowles C. Camerer E. Fehr H. Gintis and R. McElreath, "In search of Homo economicus: Behavioural experiments in 15 small-scale societies," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (2001), pp. 73-78.

[34] See Stephen Peter Rosen, *The DNA of Strategy*. In prep.

[35] Bradley A. Thayer, "Bringing in Darwin: Evolutionary Theory, Realism, and International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 124-151; Philip E. Tetlock, "Social psychology and world politics." In *Handbook of Social Psychology*, edited by D. Gilbert, S. Fiske and G. Lindzey. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998).

[36] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," p. 380.

[37] Robert O. Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Winter 1983), pp. 3-30.

3. THEORY AND EVIDENCE FOR POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

The empirical positive bias for systematically over-optimistic evaluations has been called 'positive illusions' because "insofar as it is logically impossible for most people to be better than others, we label this tendency an illusion."[38] I will review some empirical evidence for positive illusions below, but more important is the two recent developments have established firm *theoretical* grounds for expecting that positive illusions should occur in humans, and also that they may be particularly associated with conflict. Both of these developments contribute to understanding the empirical data, and to the formulation of specific predictions. First of all, the evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers has developed a theory for why humans are subject to powerful *functional* mechanisms of self-deception (of which positive illusions is one type).[39] Second, Richard Wrangham has proposed that positive illusions would have been selected for in specific association with conflict behaviour over the course of human evolution.[40]

3.1. Self-deception

Robert Trivers has developed strong theoretical grounds to expect evolution to have favoured various forms of self-deception in brain function, which builds on growing empirical evidence that self-deception plays an important and systematic role in many aspects of human behaviour and decision-making.[41] The numerous examples (especially in conflict situations) of apparent self-deception in non-human animals,[42] including our near relatives, chimpanzees,[43] implies that it may have an ancient origin in the evolution of the brain. Humans themselves have an uncanny acuity with regard to detecting cheats - we are extremely sensitive to behavioural cues and facial expressions associated with lying and deception, indicating this ability has been under significant selective pressure.[44] As Trivers argues, in order to subvert these ever-improving detection

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[38] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited", p. 23.

[39] Robert L. Trivers, "The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 907 (2000), pp. 114-131.

[40] Wrangham, "Is Military Incompetence Adaptive?"

[41] Trivers, "The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception."

[42] S. Rohwer and F.A. Rohwer, "Status signalling in Harris sparrows: experimental deception achieved," *Animal Behaviour*, Vol. 26, (1978), pp. 1012-1022; A.P. Møller and J.P. Swaddle, "Social control of deception among status signalling house sparrows *Passer domesticus*," *Behavioural Ecology and Sociobiology*, Vol. 20, (1987), pp. 307-311; Robert L. Trivers, "Deceit and self-deception: the relationship between communication and consciousness." In *Man and Beast Revisited*, edited by M. H. Robinson and L. Tiger. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 175-192.

[43] Frans B. de Waal, *Peacemaking Among Primates* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Frans B. de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[44] Robert H. Frank, *Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (New York: Norton, 1988); G. Gigerenzer and K. Hug, "Domain-specific reasoning: social contracts, cheating, and perspective change," *Cognition*, Vol. 43, (1992), pp. 127-171; Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Origins of Cooperation* (London: Penguin, 1996); Keating, C. F., & Heltman, K. R. (1994). Dominance and deception in children and adults: Are leaders the best misleaders? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20*, 312-321, p.320; Caroline F. Keating, Charismatic Faces: Social Status Cues Put Face Appeal in Context.

mechanisms, many aspects of our behaviour have become *self*-deceptive, in order to exclude the possibility that we physically betray our own lies - if one does not know one is lying, it is impossible for another individual to detect the lie by observing our behaviour. Thus, self-deception may be highly adaptive if it increases the credibility of the bluff.

3.2. Positive Illusions

When I tell people about the positive illusions phenomenon, about 50% of them immediately question the notion that people are overconfident (and they usually cite various depressed people they know). Interestingly, a high proportion of that 50% are women, and indeed it appears that men suffer from positive illusions more than women.[45] Nevertheless, it is to some extent true that humans of both sexes are generally thought to be risk-averse. That is, they commonly act and behave cautiously as if to avoid the consequences of potentially damaging events. For example, they take out insurance that is rarely claimed, overweight small-probability events, and heavily discount the value of goods with respect to time.[46] Certain individuals lack self-esteem, and are not overconfident. However, risk-aversion is specific to particular (usually economic) contexts, and the weight of evidence in the literature rules low self-esteem individuals out as exceptions to the general rule: "The evidence on this point is clear: Most healthy adults are positively biased in their self-perceptions."[47] In general, "Most people view themselves, the world, and the future in a considerably more positive light than reality can sustain."[48] Moreover, precisely as the potentially deleterious effects of being risk-averse and succumbing to negativity would predict, there is also overwhelming empirical evidence that behaviour described as positive illusions serve advantageous functions.[49] People with high self-perceptions are more likely to attain success than those whose views are modest, and this is true even if perceptions are exaggerated.[50] This makes intuitive sense because "if self-efficacy beliefs always reflected only what people could do

In Rhodes & L. A. Zebrowitz (Eds.) *Advances in Visual Cognition, Vol. I.. Facial Attractiveness: Evolutionary, Cognitive, and Social Perspectives* (Westport, Conn: Ablex, in press), pp. 153-192.

[45] "In general, women tend to have negative illusions about themselves, meaning that they regard themselves as slightly less skilled or competent than they really are. On the other hand, men tend to have positive illusions, meaning they exaggerate their own abilities, compared to the way either others see them or they perform in tests. These things are certainly changeable. They depend a lot on power relations. If you put a woman in a dominant power relation, she tends to get a positive illusion; if you put a man in a subordinate relationship he tends to get a negative illusion." See http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ wrangham/wrangham_index.html.

[46] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect theory: An analysis of decisions under risk," *Econometrica,* Vol. 47, (1979), pp. 263-291. John H. Kagel & Alvin E. Roth (eds) *The Handbook of Experimental Economics.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[47] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited", p. 23. See also the many references therein and these authors' previous work.

[48] Max H. Bazerman, Jared R. Curhan, Don A. Moore and Kathleen L. Valley, "Negotiation," *Annual Review of Psychology,* Vol. 51 (2000), pp. 279-314, p. 285.

[49] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited"; Wrangham, "Is military incompetence adaptive?"

[50] R.J. Sternberg & J. Kolligan (eds) *Competence considered* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

routinely, they would rarely fail but they would not mount the extra effort needed to surpass their ordinary performances."[51] The social psychology literature has generally accepted this view, and there is a "widely held view that self-confidence enhances a person's performance, and that positive self-perceptions, even if somewhat illusory by objective standards, tend to serve people well in life."[52] Thus, although in certain circumstances people are cautious, under-confident, or simply unsure of their capabilities, on average, people hold positive images of themselves. It is easy to argue that military and political leaders are likely to be at the high end of this distribution.

3.3. Empirical Evidence of Positive Illusions

Positive illusions are not just an oddity of certain experimental tests. They have been well documented from numerous empirical studies showing that the majority of people consistently over-rate their health, leadership ability, professional competence, sporting ability or ethics, and they are also evident when people assess themselves as a team.[53] People hold unrealistically positive evaluations not only of themselves,[54] but also of their control over events,[55] and of the future: "evidence for unrealistic optimism in normal samples is voluminous and continues to grow. According to [one source], there are at least 121 articles on perceived invulnerability and optimistic biases about risk and future life events alone."[56] For some specific examples, people tend to see themselves as being better than others with respect to intelligence and attractiveness,[57] fairness,[58] or skill.[59] They overestimate their ability to control what are in fact uncontrollable events,[60] or other people's behaviour. For example, when playing Prisoner's Dilemma games, subjects have been found to act as if they can control the simultaneous decision of the other player, even where this is impossible.[61] In bargaining situations, people tend to overweight views

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[51] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited," p.24.
[52] Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behaviour and the Quest for Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 31.
[53] See the numerous studies cited in: Trivers, "The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception"; Wrangham, "Is military incompetence adaptive?"; Bazerman, Curhan, Moore and Valley, "Negotiation."
[54] J.D. Brown, "Evaluations of self and others: self-enhancement biases in social judgments," *Social Cognition*, Vol. 4 (1986), pp. 353-376; D.W. Griffin D. Dunning and L. Ross, "The Role of Construal Processes in Overconfident Predictions about the Self and Others," *Journal of Pers. Soc. Psychol.*, Vol. 59 (1990), pp. 1128-1139.
[55] Langer, E.J. "The illusion of control", *Journal of Personality and Social* Psychology Vol. 32, pp. 311-328.
[56] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited," p. 26.
[57] M.T. Gabriel J.W. Critelli and J.S. Ee, "Narcissistic illusions in self-evaluations of intelligence and attractiveness," *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 62 (1994), pp. 143-55.
[58] D.M. Messick S. Bloom J.P. Boldizar and C.D. Samuelson, "Why we are fairer than others," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 21 (1985), pp. 480-500
[59] O. Svenson, "Are we less risky and more skillful than our fellow drivers?," *Acta Psychologia*, Vol. 47 (1981), pp. 143-151.
[60] Langer, "The illusion of control"; J. Crocker, "Biased questions in judgment of covariation studies," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 8 (1982), pp. 214-220; R.M. Kramer, "The Sinister Attribution Error: Paranoid Cognition and Collective Distrust in Organizations," *Motiv. and Emot.*, Vol. 18 (1994), pp. 199-230; D.T. Miller and M. Ross, "Self-serving Biases in the Attribution of Causality: Fact or Fiction?," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 82 (1975), pp. 213-215.
[61] M.W. Morris D.L.H. Sim and V. Girotto, "Distinguishing Sources of Cooperation in the One-round Prisoner's Dilemma: Evidence for Cooperative Decisions Based on the Illusion of Control," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 34

that favour themselves, to be overly optimistic about achievable outcomes, and to be overconfident that they will attain them.[62] After the event, people tend to attribute failures to uncooperative and unethical practices by the opponent, not to themselves.[63] They also tend to inadvertently increase the costs of conflict by preventing combined gains and delaying agreement, which leads to escalation.[64] Such effects are now so common in the literature that they have been combined to build a general theory for why it is that positive illusions are so ubiquitous and how they may serve useful functions.[65] Not everyone in every situation will suffer from positive illusions, but "the evidence clearly indicates that most people anticipate that their future will be brighter than can reasonably be justified on statistical grounds."[66]

Crucially, a number of empirical studies showed accurate information was in fact available, but remained concealed in the sub-conscious until needed (i.e. in some other context), implying that positive illusions represent a self-serving *bias* via self-deception and do not constitute an assessment *error* arising from some deficiency in cognitive processing.[67] This is an important distinction because humans have been shown to exhibit a number of consistent psychological biases that appear to be simply errors of calculation (rather than adaptive heuristic rules). One of these has been called "overconfidence bias," and stems from the empirical result that people tend to overestimate the probability that their answers to questions or their assessments of certain outcomes are correct.[68] Overconfidence bias is not the same as positive illusions, because the former arises from cognitive error, while the latter is an adaptive bias that serves useful functions. Nevertheless, such errors could in theory also account for over-ambition in political or military objectives. However, the effects are observable only under certain conditions, and completely disappear under others,[69] so the idea that overconfidence bias generally relates to deficient

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(1998), pp. 494-512; E. Shafir and A. Tversky, "Thinking Through Uncertainty: Nonconsequential Reasoning and Choice," *Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 24 (1992), pp. 449-474.

[62] R.M. Kramer E. Newton and P.L. Pommerenke, "Self-enhancement biases and negotiator judgment: effects of self-esteem and mood," *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processing*, Vol. 56 (1993), pp. 110-133; Bazerman, Curhan, Moore and Valley, "Negotiation"; R.G; Lim, "Overconfidence in Negotiation Revisited," *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 8 (1997), pp. 52-79.

[63] R.M. Kramer, "The Sinister Attribution Error: Paraoid Cognition and Collective Distrust in Organizations," *Motiv. and Emot.*, Vol. 18 (1994), pp. 199-230.

[64] C.K.W. De Dreu A. Nauta and E. van de Vliert, "Self-serving Evaluations of Conflict Behaviour and Escalation of the Dispute," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 25 (1995), pp. 2049-2066.

[65] Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind*; Taylor, "Positive illusions"; S.E. Taylor and D.A. Armor, "Positive illusions and coping with adversity," *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 64 (1996), pp. 873-898; Taylor and Brown, "Illusion and well-being: a social psychological perspective on mental health."

[66] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited," p. 27.

[67] These studies are discussed in: Wrangham, "Is military incompetence adaptive?"

[68] Tetlock, "Social psychology and world politics."

[69] Gur Gigerenzer, "How to make cognitive illusions disappear: Beyond "Heuristics and Biases"." In *European Review of Social Psychology, Volume 2*, edited by W. Stroebe and M. Hewstone. (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1991).

cognition or motivation has been rejected.[70] Rather, it seems more likely that it is an *adaptive* mechanism for people's underlying confidence that is at work. "The hypothesis that assessment failure in military contexts represents a design flaw, or a maladaptive constraint, cannot be supported merely by the occurrence of biases in other contexts or of closely related types of bias ... it would be a surprise if the widespread occurrence of positive illusions in battles is maladaptive."[71]

3.4. The Adaptive Theory of Positive Illusions

Although self-deceptive, positive illusions are advantageous because, even if wrong, they enable individuals or groups to be more effective in achieving mental or physical goals.[72] Richard Wrangham has therefore proposed that, in conflict situations, if positive illusions enhance combat performance, and thus enhance the probability of winning a conflict, they would have been favoured by natural selection over the course of human evolution.[73] Wrangham argued strongly for this in view of the now wide consensus that fighting has been frequent and severe throughout human evolution.[74] Significant to this clam is the finding that positive illusions are directly responsive to threatening circumstances.[75] There are two distinct processes by which self-deception through positive illusions might confer advantages in strategic interactions (see Figure 1.1). Both, however, would also tend to promote conflict and may thus provide an explanation for military incompetence, overzealous war initiation, and elevated levels of violence:

3.4.1. Performance Enhancement

An exaggerated assessment of one's own capability stemming from positive illusions may increase the probability of winning via deception of oneself. Positive Illusions have been demonstrated to suppress thoughts or feelings that would interrupt progress towards a goal and to increase the chance of success as a result. For example, positive illusions enhance performance in sporting competitions,[76] challenging illness,[77] and in cooperation games.[78] Positive illusions

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[70] Gur Gigerenzer, "The bounded rationality of probabilistic mental modules." In *Rationality*, edited by K. I. Manktelow and D. E. Over. (London: Routledge, 1993).

[71] Wrangham, "Is military incompetence adaptive?", pp. 9, 12.

[72] C.R. Gur and H.A. Sackheim, "Self-deception: a concept in search of a phenomenon," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 37 (1979), pp. 147-169.

[73] Wrangham, "Is military incompetence adaptive?"

[74] Wrangham, R. & Peterson, D. (1996) *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence*. Bloomsbury, London; Keeley, L. H. *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[75] Taylor & Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited," see p. 28.

[76] J.E. Starek and C.F. Keating, "Self-deception and its relationship to success in competition," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 12 (1991), pp. 145-155.

[77] Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind*; Taylor and Armor. "Positive illusions and coping with adversity."

could therefore increase the probability of winning conflicts by enhancing performance via increased resolve.

3.4.2. Opponent Deception

An exaggerated assessment of one's own capability stemming from positive illusions may also increase the probability of winning via deception of the opponent, since it increases the chance of successfully bluffing the enemy into believing that he cannot, or is unlikely, to win. Bluffs are more likely to be believed by your opponent if you are not aware of the fallacy yourself, so positive illusions, though self-deceptive, serve to prevent betraying the bluff.[79]

These two strategies nestle neatly with Thomas Hobbes' note that, "Force, and fraud, are in war the cardinal virtues."[80] The general idea that combatants experience delusional psychological states is not novel: "by working themselves up to a state of extreme excitement, warriors could sometimes mount reckless attacks *and tip the balance between victory and defeat*. Moros in the Philippines amazed American soldiers by such behaviour as recently as 1911; Viking berserkers had done the same in Europe a millennium before."[81] Obviously, these are extreme examples, but they illustrate the point well: That it could "tip the balance" supports the proposition that positive illusions could have served as an adaptive trait in our evolution.[82] It can of course still be

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[78] M.K. Surbey and J.J. McNally, "Self-deception as a mediator of cooperation and defection in varying social contexts described in the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma," *Evolution and Human Behaviour,* Vol. 18 (1997), pp. 417-435.

[79] Trivers, "The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception." The word 'bluff' implies *conscious* deception, but the positive illusions hypothesis suggests that the bluff occurs sub-consciously (one is not aware of over-estimating oneself), so I use 'opponent-deception' in preference. The Collins Dictionary (London, 1987) gives the definition of 'bluff' as: (1) "To pretend to be confident about an uncertain issue in order to influence (someone)." (2) "Deliberate deception intended to create the impression of a stronger position that one actually has." The positive illusions hypothesis implies that it is advantageous to bluff an opponent into thinking that one is stronger than is true. If one is trying to avoid conflict, then it is usually advantageous to bluff strength (and this is the basis of deterrence). James Fearon wrote that "updating about opponent's resolve or willingness to fight" is a very common feature in war. See Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," p. 409. Sometimes, the opposite may serve a useful function - duping one's enemy into overconfidence by acting weak going into battle might make him complacent and misallocate resources.

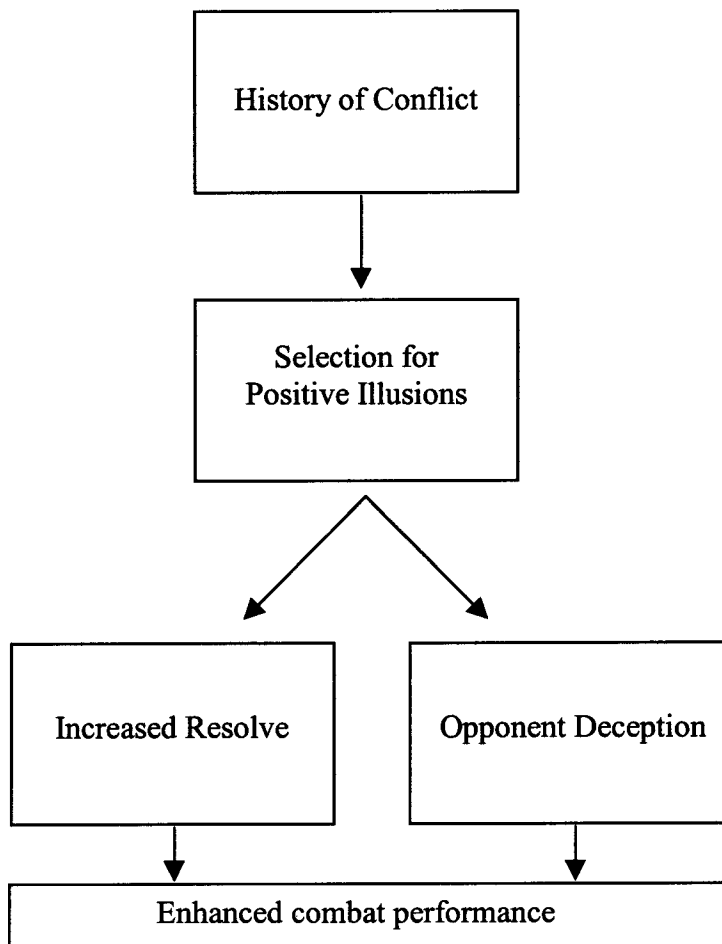[80] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651).

[81] W.H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 102. My italics.

[82] Non-biologists often see these mechanisms as stalemated - what is the point of having positive illusions if your opponent also has positive illusions blinding him to reality? Does this not predict you would both cancel out each other's advantage? Indeed, if in the past positive illusions were an adaptive strategy, then they are expected to be ubiquitous (and thus apparent on both sides of a conflict). But it is better to envisage it as an arms race, even if dangerous adaptations (e.g. horns, big canines, fighting itself) decrease the mean fitness of a population, the pressure from natural selection acts on individual self-interests, not on the population or the species (See Dawkins, R. *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976) for a review of this literature). 'Fit' individuals are selected independently of the population as a whole and fend for themselves alone - the selfish advantage of initiating or continuing an arms race is overwhelming. If no one in the population deceived opponents about strength, it would be a well-rewarded strategy to start doing so, and traits that lead to this behaviour would spread rapidly. The opportunity to cheat maintains individual selfishness, regardless of increased mortality risk in the population as a whole. R.J. Herrnstein, "Darwinism and behaviourism: Parallels and intersections." In *Evolution and its Influence*, edited by A. Grafen. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Positive illusions are not expected to always have positive effects. They may have on average, in terms of selection, but they increase risk-taking behaviour and therefore the likelihood of conflict also.

adaptive today (if risky). In North Africa, Rommel became famous for making bold attacks with inferior forces yet successfully scattering his opponents. At the battle of Plassey in 1757, Robert Clive's 3,000 strong British East India Company force defeated Siraj-ud-Daula's massive army composed of 50,000 cavalry and infantry, plus elephants and a numerically superior artillery. Lawrence James wrote that "What tipped the balance was Clive's overwhelming self-confidence and offensive spirit which made his army like a tiger, who 'never needed to charge if he can scatter his enemies with a roar'. The roar proved too much for Siraj's army; it fell apart and fled." A huge victory was won with the minimal cost of supreme confidence. Anecdotal examples such as these are intended only to illustrate the point that, as Eisenhower once said, "What counts is not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog."

Understanding the occurrence of apparently deleterious traits is also identical to the security dilemma: what is the point in building up armaments if your opponent just does the same? It is a simple game theoretical result. Rational players are still expected to arrive at the Nash equilibrium of mutual defection even if it is pareto-deficient (everyone could have done better in retrospect). In other words, defection still occurs despite it being costly and self-defeating. In a population with incomplete information, actors defect from cooperative outcomes because they are unable to guarantee that others will also behave in good faith. Even if everyone sees the costs involved, incomplete information regarding the other sides intentions means that both sides fall into the pareto-deficient abyss of mutual armaments escalation from which it is difficult to escape. If one sees the danger but fails to build more weapons, then one just magnifies the dilemma because the threat becomes greater. This has an interesting consequence: It may be better to maintain a benchmark assumption that the danger is always real, to ensure that one errs on the side of caution and reacts appropriately to avoid that situation in the first place. See Robert Jervis's discussion of this point in Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," p. 19.

Figure 1.1. Scheme of the origins and mechanisms of positive illusions. The intense history of human conflict selects for positive illusions, which by either of two mechanisms may confer adaptive advantages by either increasing resolve or deceiving the opponent. Both mechanisms may operate simultaneously. Furthermore, these hypothesised mechanisms of the positive illusions hypothesis do not exclude the possibility that conscious efforts (e.g. policy statements) to strengthen resolve and bluff the opponent are made as well.

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            ┌─────────────────────┐
            │  History of Conflict │
            └─────────────────────┘
                       │
                       ▼
            ┌─────────────────────┐
            │     Selection for    │
            │   Positive Illusions │
            └─────────────────────┘
                  ╱        ╲
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      ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐
      │   Increased  │  │     Opponent     │
      │   Resolve    │  │    Deception     │
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      │   Enhanced combat performance      │
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3.5. A Recent Empirical Test of Positive Illusions in War

We recently conducted an empirical test of the two proposed mechanisms ('performance enhancement' and 'opponent deception') by which positive illusions might confer an advantage in military conflict.[83] The two mechanisms can be distinguished because, while performance-enhancement predicts that positive illusions confer advantages in any type of conflict, opponent-deception predicts that positive illusions occur only in battles and not in surprise attacks, because the latter do not involve any opportunity for communication with (and hence deception of) the enemy.

We were therefore able to test two predictions unique to the opponent-deception hypothesis: (1) Positive illusions (operationalised as attacking a force of superior strength)[84] are more common in battles than in surprise attacks; and (2) For any given asymmetry in force strengths, the outcomes of battles are less predictable than are surprise attacks since it is only in battles that positive illusions are suggested to confer an advantage that, supplementary to the advantages of force strengths alone, could bring victory. Thus, while one would expect the outcome of all engagement types to become increasingly distinct with an increasing discrepancy in force strengths between opponents, the slope of this relationship was predicted to be steeper for surprise attacks than for battles.

The results of regression models among 120 engagements of approximately divisional strength (spanning the period 1805 – 1973) supported the predictions of the opponent deception hypothesis. Nevertheless, it was difficult to rule out alternative factors for which data were not available. Consequently, we proposed that future work should conduct detailed case study analyses to determine whether positive illusions are actually observable in those making the decisions, while taking account of the myriad other variables.

4. POSITIVE ILLUSIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Much more important than positive illusions in just military clashes on the battlefield, however, is whether positive illusions underlie incompetence, ill-judgement or risk-taking behaviour by

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[83] Johnson, Wrangham and Rosen, "Is military incompetence adaptive? An empirical test with risk-raking behaviour in modern warfare;" See also Nicola Jones, "The underdog might win the day," *New Scientist* vol. 175 (03 August 2002), p.21

[84] Obviously, this assumes complete information (i.e. that opponents 'knew' if they were inferior), which is unlikely. Methodologically, however, this was justified by the fact that variation in real information among battles should not have been biased in any particular direction and so was not expected to affect the outcome.

political leaders in the larger arena of international relations and in particular the initiation of wars themselves. As Jervis has made clear, "although war can occur even when both sides see each other accurately, misperception often plays a large role."[85] I suggest that positive illusions, rather than random misperceptions in general, are an observable and hugely deleterious phenomenon in international relations. As Philip Tetlock anticipated, "the mistaken belief that one is militarily superior to a rival may generate risky policies that can lead to costly wars that no one wanted."[86]

4.1. Illustrative Precedents

In this section, I briefly consider examples of international events in which behaviour consistent with positive illusions appears to have been an important factor leading to war. They highlight the problem of potentially confounding historical and cultural factors. However, they also show that leaders may hold biases towards highly confident assessments that are consistent with the positive illusions hypothesis. I have avoided presenting my recent major cases studies (of the Munich Crisis, World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Vietnam),[87] because everyone has a pet theory about those events and my arguments build on detail too long to provide an effective demonstration in the present paper.

4.1.1. The 1904 Russo-Japanese war

"On the eve of the war, Russian leaders believed that their military could almost certainly defeat Japan ... the Japanese chief of staff estimated a fifty-fifty chance of prevailing, if their attack began immediately. Thus Japanese and Russian leaders disagreed about relative power – their estimates of the likelihood of victory summed to greater than 1. Moreover, historical accounts implicate this disagreement as a major cause of the war."[88]

4.1.2. World War I

The origins of World War I are still to some extent hotly disputed. But initial confidence of victory was something that has always been recognised, if not fully understood:

> "In Berlin and Paris during early August 1914, hundreds of thousands of people enthusiastically celebrated the outcome of the war that many had begun to see as inevitable.

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[85] Jervis, "War and Misperception," p. 675; See also Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war."
[86] Tetlock, Social psychology and world politics, p. 878.
[87] Johnson, D.D.P. (2002) Daring to Win: Origins and Effects of Positive Illusions in International Conflict. Master's Thesis, University of Geneva. The cases were selected before analysis according to criteria based on two independent variables: information availability and regime type.
[88] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," p. 399.

On both sides, virtually everyone expected a short, victorious war. Their troops, heading off to the fighting in early August, would be 'home before the leaves fall', and then there would be more cheering and celebrations ... By the end of the year, German and French forces had combined casualties of 300,000 killed and 600,000 wounded. The British seventh division arrived in France in October with 400 officers and 12,000 soldiers: after eighteen days of fighting around Ypres, it had 44 officers and 2,336 men left."[89]

4.1.3. The Arab-Israeli Wars

In our empirical test of the positive illusions hypothesis, the Arab-Israeli wars showed up as those with the most incidences of asymmetric force strengths. It seemed pertinent, therefore, to look further for evidence of decision makers holding optimistic beliefs about winning probability. In the build up to the 1967 war, Chaim Herzog wrote that "hysteria seized the Arab world. Nasser was again at the peak of popularity, as one Arab government after the other volunteered support and was caught up in the enthusiasm of the impending war."[90] Prior to the 1973 war, it has been suggested that "at every level Israel underestimated her enemy."[91] Israeli Chief of Staff David Elazar said of the Syrian forces, just ten days before the war, "We'll have one hundred tanks against their eight hundred ... That ought to be enough."[92] Israeli combat superiority was indeed higher than their enemies according to T.N. Dupuy's detailed quantitative analysis,[93] but even then by a factor of two, not eight. Baylis Thomas wrote of "Israel's complacency about its invincibility and a certain racist assumption about the inferiority of Arab soldiers."[94] (It will become clear later that these racial comparisons are tightly linked to positive illusions). The Egyptians themselves attributed Israel with "a potentially fatal overconfidence caused by a combination of arrogance and a superiority complex from constant victory."[95]

On the other side, there have been some interesting statements made about Arab self-confidence. Dupuy wrote that "there was ... an Arab cultural tendency to allow emotion and wishful thinking to influence planning, evaluation and operational leadership."[96] According to one Palestinian Arab, "We are emotional rather than coldly analytical. Honour is exaggerated at the expense of real need. We would *like* to see certain things and we think they *are*."[97] Dupuy states that an

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[89] Merriman, J. (1996) *Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present* (London, Norton, 1996), p.1039-1045.

[90] Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the War of Independence through Lebanon* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. 149.

[91] Hughes-Wilson, *Military Intelligence Blunders*, p. 257.

[92] Thomas, *How Israel Was Won*, p. 199.

[93] Trevor N. Dupuy, *Numbers, Prediction, and War: Using History to Evaluate Combat Factors and Predict the Outcome of Battles* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1985).

[94] Thomas, *How Israel Was Won*, p. 199.

[95] Hughes-Wilson, *Military Intelligence Blunders*, p. 228. The 'constant victory' component of course suggests a perfectly rational origin of Israeli confidence.

[96] Dupuy, *Numbers, Prediction, and War*, p. 137.

[97] Patai, 1976, Patai's italics; cited in Dupuy, *Numbers, Prediction, and War*, p. 138.

Egyptian general also identified this cultural tendency "in almost identical words".[98] Leaving these anecdotal impressions aside, the facts imply that Egyptian leaders certainly had great confidence in its (limited) war aims were possible because "for Egypt to cross the Suez Canal to establish a beachhead on the east bank was considered impossible by all military observers."[99]

4.1.4. The Falklands War

The Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982, and the British response to it, contained serious miscalculations on both sides (and always in the positive direction). From Argentina's point of view, the attack came much too soon to be tactically sound. "By September Argentina would have [had] a full complement of Exocets and reloads, and to launch an attack any earlier seemed folly. To mount an invasion at the beginning of April was quite irrational, bearing in mind the changeover of Naval Party 8901; this was the overlap period when the local garrison of [British] Royal Marines effectively doubled."[100] Thereafter, there appeared to have been complete surprise at the British reaction, since "the invasion, which had been planned on three entirely flawed assumptions," included the belief that Britain would not fight at all.[101] David Welch also concluded that "the Argentine leadership seriously underestimated the likelihood of a British military response."[102]

On the British side, "insufficient weight had been given to the Latin preference for over-optimism and giving quite undue significance to relatively trivial events,"[103] and "the British grossly underestimated the danger of an Argentinean attack."[104] The rapid reaction force send to the South Atlantic was sent with very high expectations of their capability.[105] Events unfolded in their favour, but this was not without considerable elements of luck, and major emergency intelligence operations to forestall further Exocet purchases in France. I do not suggest that positive illusions necessarily affected the progress of the war, but they may have played a part in the decision, by both sides, that it should be fought.

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[98] Dupuy, *Numbers, Prediction, and War*, p. 138.
[99] Thomas, *How Israel Was Won*, p. 198.
[100] West, *The Secret War for the Falklands*, p. 53.
[101] West, *The Secret War for the Falklands*, p. 108.
[102] Welch, *Justice and the Genesis of War*, p. 156.
[103] West, *The Secret War for the Falklands*, p. 56.
[104] Welch, *Justice and the Genesis of War*, p. 156.
[105] Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (HaperCollins, London, 1993)

4.1.5. The Korean War

Max Hastings wrote in *The Korean War* that "At the root of American action lay a contempt, conscious or unconscious, for the capabilities of Mao Tse-tsung's nation and armed forces."[106] The American commander General MacArthur appeared to be particularly subject to positive estimates of his own capabilities relative to those of the enemy. They key was to capture North Korea without provoking the hostile nations on the northern borders, but in fact "the United States did not even grasp the Chinese fear that, if the U.S. conquered North Korea, it would threaten China."[107] For example, the Secretary of State Dean Acheson said there was "no danger" that they would intervene because he assumed US intentions were transparent to the Chinese.[108] Dean Rusk, then the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs also "firmly and wrongly predicted" that the Chinese would not intervene.[109] MacArthur dismissed the British proposal to leave a neutral strip along Chinese frontier, and instructed his senior commanders to press on into North Korea using all ground forces necessary. This contradicted former policy of restricting military action in the border areas, and he ignored a challenge to this order by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But the Chinese had already made clear their intention to intervene if the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel. MacArthur told President Truman at their mid-war meeting on Wake Island in the Pacific that "in the unlikely event of the Chinese intervening, his air force would commit 'the greatest slaughter'."[110] If they did intervene, MacArthur reckoned that "if the Russians supported the Chinese with planes, their incompetence would cause them to 'bomb the Chinese as often as they would bomb us'."[111] As we all know, in November 180,000 Chinese soldiers attacked the coalition forces as they approached the Yalu River and ultimately drove them all the way back to the 38th Parallel. The result (apart from the deaths of 450,000 South Koreans, 33,000 Americans, 3,000 allies from other nations, and around 1.5 million North Koreans and Chinese), was an armistice simply re-establishing (approximately) the pre-war borders. As Saul David concluded: "Such an outcome could have been achieved before Christmas 1950 if MacArthur and the U.S. government had not been so ready to underestimate the political will and fighting capability of the Chinese."[112]

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[106] Cited in David, *Military Blunders*, p. 273.
[107] Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," p. 14.
[108] Jervis, "War and Misperception," p. 689.
[109] Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, p. 284.
[110] David, *Military Blunders*, p. 272.
[111] David, *Military Blunders*, p. 272.
[112] David, *Military Blunders.* p. 278.

5. REINFORCEMENT OF POSITIVE ILLUSIONS BY DENIAL

Trivers noted important interactions between the different potential mechanisms through which self-deception occurs.[113] For example, holding positive illusions is often associated with the denial of corrective information. This is crucial because denial of intelligence reports and information counter to illusory beliefs are a widely documented cause of political and military disasters.[114] For example, the British ignored a direct warning of an impending attack on the Falkland Islands by a locally placed military intelligence officer.[115] Similarly, Israeli senior commanders dismissed repeated warnings from their own intelligence staff of the impending Egyptian invasion in 1973.[116] Perhaps the most famous example is Stalin's refusal to believe in the coming German invasion in 1941, despite massive German armaments forming up for weeks beforehand on the Soviet frontier.[117] "As long as Stalin pursued his futile policy of friendship with Nazi Germany, he strongly denied any evidence (which was quite plentiful in this case) that Hitler intended to attack the Soviet Union."[118] Indeed, "Between late July 1940 and 22 June 1941, no less than ninety separate, unequivocal warnings of an impending attack on the Soviet Union were passed to Stalin. In every case they were professionally collated, evaluated, interpreted and briefed to Stalin ... He had the details of [operation] Barbarossa placed in front of him from almost every intelligence source imaginable: yet he ignored them all."[119] Denial of information which contradicts formerly held beliefs is a well-known phenomenon known to psychologists as 'cognitive dissonance.' Interestingly, this exact phenomenon was independently picked up in a 1980 report (prior to the Falklands) on the British Joint Intelligence Commission. The authors noted a consistent failing to update on the basis of new information, and they even invented a term of their own to describe it: "perserveration."[120]

Another example comes from Erwin Rommel's systematic rejection of good intelligence about an impending attack by the British Eighth Army in the autumn of 1941. This prospect was harassing him to give up his "obsession" with capturing Tobruk. "In the end, however, he succeeded in persuading himself and paid the penalty of self-delusion."[121] Most strangely, his own intelligence officer supported him, and reassured a liaison officer for the Italian Intelligence that "the British won't attack." Worst of all, the intelligence was not passed on to lower formations, so that the

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[113] Trivers, "The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception."
[114] Michael L. Handel, ed. *Leaders and Intelligence* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1989).
[115] West, *The Secret War for the Falklands.*
[116] John Hughes-Wilson, *Military Intelligence Blunders* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1999).
[117] Allan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London: HarperCollins, 1991).
[118] Handel, *Leaders and Intelligence*, p. 9.
[119] Hughes-Wilson, *Military Intelligence Blunders*, p. 41, 353.
[120] West, *The Secret War for the Falklands*, p. 226.
[121] Handel, *Leaders and Intelligence*, p. 11 - 12.

British attack achieved considerable tactical surprise. "This is a classic example of how a military leader with a strong personality can 'convince' all those around him to support his plans despite unambiguous evidence to the contrary."[122]

Michael Handel goes on to suggest that such effects may be even *more* likely in politics because: "What holds true for a strong-willed military leader is even easier for a political leader, who often deals with an adversary's intentions and long-range policies rather than with air photographs, tank and troop concentrations and other 'hard' evidence."[123] Positive illusions and denial of counter information may therefore be especially pertinent to international politics. Robert Jervis offers a further reason to suspect this would be true:

> "Military optimism is especially dangerous when coupled with political and diplomatic pessimism. A country is especially likely to strike if it feels that, although it can win a war immediately, the chances of a favourable diplomatic settlement are slight and the military situation is likely to deteriorate. Furthermore, these estimates, which are logically independent, may be psychologically linked. Pessimism about current diplomatic and long-run military prospects may lead statesmen to exaggerate the possibility of current military victory as a way of convincing themselves that there is, in fact, a solution to what otherwise would be an intolerable dilemma."[124]

This scenario finds an almost precise precedent in the Dutch government's decision to launch a pre-emptive military strike to try and avert the collapse of their colonial rule in Indonesia.[125]

6. MULTIPLE LEVELS OF DECEPTION

The empirical literature on positive illusions usually deals with individuals' evaluations. However, positive biases are evident in interactions not only between individuals, but between organizations and societies as well.[126]

6.1. Organizations

Group processes might be particularly significant in the context of war.[127] Irving Janis and Norman Dixon have argued that decision-making within groups is likely to exacerbate self-delusion, because 'Groupthink' results in specific reinforcing perceptions which include: a shared

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[122] Handel, *Leaders and Intelligence*, p. 13.
[123] Handel, *Leaders and Intelligence*, p. 13.
[124] Jervis, "War and Misperception," p. 676.
[125] Irmtraud N. Gallhofer and Willem E. Saris, *Foreign Policy Decision-making: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Political Argumentation* (Wesport, CT: Praeger, 1996).
[126] Trivers, "The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception."
[127] Rabbie, J. M. (1989) Group processes as stimulants of aggression. In: (J. Groebel & R. A. Hinde) (ed) *Aggression and War*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. pp. 141-155.

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illusion of invulnerability; collective attempts to maintain shaky but cherished assumptions; an unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality; stereotyping the enemy as too evil for negotiation,[128] or too weak to be a threat; a collective illusion of unanimity in a majority viewpoint (based on the faulty assumption that silence means consent); and self-appointed mind guards to protect the group from information that might weaken resolve.[129] Karen Alter recently claimed to have identified all six criteria in the Bush administration's current blustering over Iraq.[130]

Self-deception leading to over-optimism in groups or organisations is famously illustrated by the failings leading up to the Challenger space shuttle disaster in 1986.[131] There had been a gradual transition of the NASA Safety Unit from ensuring safety to simply 'rationalising' their own safety infringements. Trivers shows how this resulted from self-deception among the senior management, in large part fuelled by the embattled nature of a bureaucratic machine with failing support and ever more poorly specified goals. The decision to go ahead with the mission was made even though all twelve engineers at Thiokol, the firm that made the faulty part, voted *against* the launch that day.

6.2. Societies

Whole societies can succumb to mutually reinforced positive illusions because of inherent differences in feedback from in-group and out-group interactions. Within groups, any inaccuracies should be limited by overlapping interests and continuous corrective information. However, between groups, views of self-enhancement within each separate group receive little or no informational feedback from other groups. That is, misconceptions are challenged much less frequently (and are often fuelled by recriminations from the target group). Similarly, negative views about outsiders' moral worth, physical strength and bravery remain unchecked by feedback or shared interest. These result in poor assessment vis-à-vis other groups. Conflict is therefore more likely, because both sides hold positive illusions of their own group's virtues and the probability that they will win.

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[128] This was, for example, Dean Acheson's view in negotiating with the Soviets during the Cuban Missile Crisis. See Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999). One is also inclined to think of Reagan's "Evil Empire" and Bush's "Axis of Evil".

[129] Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972); Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence.*

[130] Karen J. Alter, 'Is 'groupthink' driving us to war?' *The Boston Globe* (21 September 2002).

[131] Richard Feynman, *What Do You Care What Other People Think? Further Adventures of a Curious Character* (New York: Norton, 1988).

An example is the British complacency about Japanese military capabilities before the invasion of Malaya during the Second World War. Defences were left to the last minute, at least partly because senior commanders held the belief that Japanese soldiers were small, physically weak, had poor eyesight, suffered from inferior leadership, and could not drive armour through the jungle. Of course, all this was quickly found to be false.[132]

Such in-group out-group biases follow a deep-rooted paradigm of social psychology known as 'Social Identity Theory,' founded by Tajfel [133] and Turner.[134] Social Identity Theory builds on a mass of empirical evidence demonstrating that people rapidly identify with even arbitrarily assigned groups and, more importantly, systematically overvalue their own group's performance and qualities. Tajfel argued that this results from people's deep-seated desire to maintain positive self-esteem, and that the most reliable way to do so is for people to invoke inter-group comparisons in "attempting to construe our own in-groups as both different from, and superior to, out-groups of which we are not members. This underlying drive to be different and superior was termed the need for *positive distinctiveness*."[135] Experiments have shown that people overestimate the ideological difference between themselves and an opposing group, and see their opponents' viewpoints as more extreme than they in fact are.[136] Social Identity Theory has remained the dominant paradigm in inter-group psychology (the current thrust in political psychology),[137] supported by numerous empirical studies, and its effects are seen as an "inescapable developmental phenomenon: man's need to identify some people as allies and others as enemies ... anyone trying to deal with interethnic or international conflict must grasp the psychological cogency of man's need to have enemies as well as allies, and his stubborn adherence to identification with a group when undergoing hardship and danger."[138] These effects may thus be especially critical to national groups during war.[139] Recent research has advanced both social identity theory and natural selection as good bases for explaining the assumption of

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[132] Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*.

[133] Henri Tajfel, "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour," *Social Science Information*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1974), pp. 65-93.

[134] J.C. Turner, "A Self-Categorization Theory." In *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*, edited by J. C. Turner, M. A. Hogg, P. J. Oakes, S. D. Reicher and M. S. Wetherell. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

[135] Marco Cinnirella, "A Social Identity Perspective on European Integration." In *Changing European Identities: Social Psychological Analyses of Social Change*, edited by G. M. Breakwell and E. Lyons. (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 1996), pp. 253-274. Quote from pp. 253-254.

[136] R.J. Robinson and D. Keltner, "Defending the Status Quo: Power and Bias in Social Conflict," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 23, (1997), pp. 1066-1077.

[137] William J. McGuire, "The Poly-Psy relationship: Three Phases of a Long Affair." In *Explorations in Political Psychology*, edited by S. Iyengar and W. J. McGuire. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

[138] Vamik D. Volkan, "The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: A Developmental Approach," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1985), pp. 219-247.

[139] Daniel Druckman, "Nationalism, Patriotism and Group Loyalty: A Social Psychological Perspective", *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. April (1994): 43-68.

self-help behaviour that has otherwise escaped good definition in realist theories of international relations. [140]

Various authors have begun to suggest that the growing empirical data on people's social identity biases have an evolutionary origin. [141] Various sorts of self-deception and biased opinions of one's own group relative to others, including the Groupthink biases that Janis noted, could have themselves evolved by natural selection if they were adaptive in the past (something has to explain why we experience them, if they are real). The founder of sociobiology, Edward O. Wilson, argues that such group processes would be inexorably reinforced: "There is a hereditary selective advantage to membership in a powerful group united by devout belief and purpose. Even when individuals subordinate themselves and risk death in common purpose, their genes are more likely to be transmitted to the next generation than are those of competing groups who lack equivalent resolve." [142] In addition to these evolutionary arguments, religion itself, whether as genuine or exploited by leaders to encourage adherence to doctrine, appears to have vital implications for positive biases that favour in-groups and negative perceptions of other groups:

> "The universalism of the modern Christian message has tended to obscure an obvious fact about religious teaching - that it has almost always emphasised the difference between the in-group and the out-group: us versus them; Israelite and Philistine; Jew and Gentile; saved and damned; believer and heathen; Arian and Athanasian; Catholic and Orthodox; Protestant and Catholic; Hindu and Muslim; Sunni and Shia. Religion teaches its adherents that they are a chosen race and their nearest rivals are benighted fools or even subhumans. There is nothing especially surprising in this, given the origins of most religions as beleaguered cults in tribally divided, violent societies. Edward Gibbon noticed that a vital part of Roman military success was religion: 'The attachment of the Roman troops to their standards was inspired by the united influences of religion and honour. The golden eagle, which glittered in the front of the legion, was the object of their fondest devotion; nor was it esteemed less impious that it was ignominious, to abandon that sacred ensign in the hour of danger'." [143]

7. WHEN TO EXPECT POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

Figure 1.2 schematises the main factors leading to positive illusions and three variables that are likely to filter them in different contexts (that is, to reduce them or alter their effects).

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[140] See Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 229-252; and Thayer, "Bringing in Darwin: Evolutionary Theory, Realism, and International Politics."

[141] Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue*, p. 188.

[142] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (London: Abacus, 2000), p. 287.

[143] Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue*, p. 191. The citation is from Gibbon, E. 1776-88/1993. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. I. Everyman, London.

7.1.1. Information

Positive illusions predict behaviour based on a biased assessment of one's own capabilities relative to that of an opponent. Positive illusions are predicted to be corrected faster where there is constant feedback and good intelligence, than in situations of poor information flow and bad intelligence (assuming cognitive dissonance is not absolute).

7.1.2. Regime Type

In modern democracies, public and parliamentary scrutiny may more easily detect and forestall poor assessment by the leadership (or at least oppose it effectively). By contrast, if a tyrant has a particular belief in some action, it can be pushed through without regard for dissenters. Indeed, this may partly explain the democratic peace phenomenon – unfounded confidence in winning is crushed. Data shows that, when they do fight, democracies tend to win. This has been explained partly as a result of careful assessment and selection of enemies that they know they can beat.[144] Positive illusions are predicted to be more easily dispelled by the democratic process (and the various institutions within democratic governments).

7.1.3. Decision-making Environment

Even if positive illusions were a consistent feature among all people, the structure from within which decision-makers (or the decision-making group) operate will likely influence the form and degree of how such biases are translated into policy outcomes. For example, certain issues, particularly regarding foreign policy, can be implemented without passing through the strict institutional hoops that other domestic issues must. Indeed, some legislation can be enacted without even the knowledge of other parts of the administration (deployment of special forces or covert operations, for example). The relationship between the decision-making executive and the various intelligence organisations (and them to each other) is another crucial variable filtering potential effects of positive illusions. Overall, therefore, one would predict that the decision-making environment (essentially the 'openness' of debate) has a significant impact on the quality of decision-making. Positive illusions are predicted to be reduced where decision-making is *inclusive* (open and non-partisan) and *expansive* (many options are considered).

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[144] Reed and Clark. "War initiators and war winners: The consequences of linking theories of democratic war success."

Figure 1.2. Scheme of the mechanisms and filters acting on positive illusions. The intense history of human conflict selects for positive illusions, which by either of two mechanisms confer adaptive advantages. In modern times, any such trait would be filtered by quality of information, type of regime, and the political institutions of the decision-making units.
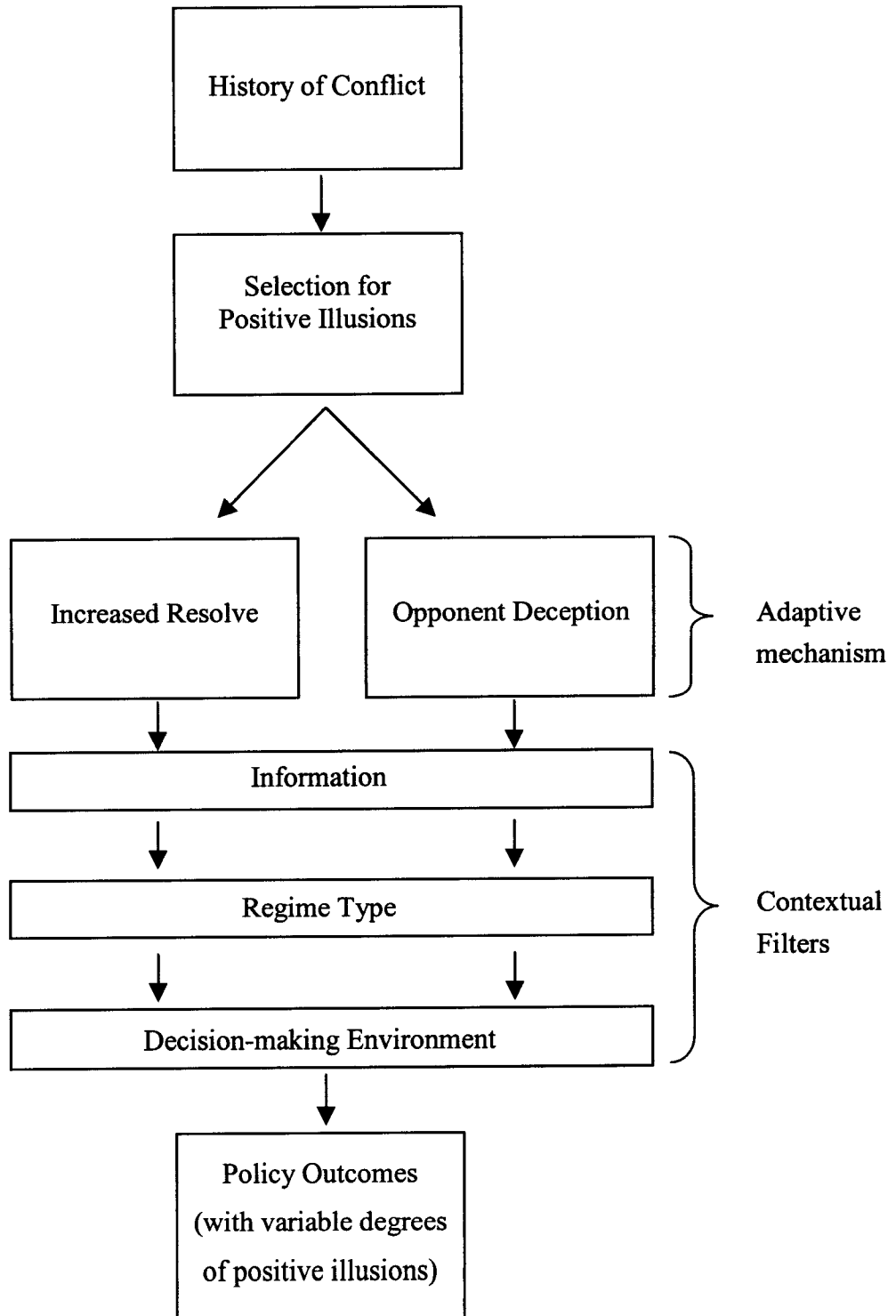
8. ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESES

I have suggested that self-deception, in particular positive illusions, can explain *some* of the variance in why states go to war. Obviously, there is a plethora of alternative (and non-exclusive) explanations for war, well-developed elsewhere.[145] Here, I briefly consider two that are direct alternatives to positive illusions because they have been contenders to explain, specifically, exaggerated assessment of winning probability in conflicts.

8.1. Stupidity

The Duke of Wellington famously noted that the difference between bravery and foolishness can be rather ambiguous, when he suggested that "There is nothing on earth so stupid as a gallant officer".[146] There will always be some well known historical examples of stupidity because they tend to be popularised, such as the persistent but hugely costly frontal attacks of WW I and the American Civil War.[147] Hence the metaphor, originating from the fiasco of the Crimean War and later adopted for the title of a book on WW I, that the "lions" (the soldiers) were "led by donkeys." [148] Frontal attacks apparently remained a prominent tactic because of doctrine dating from the days when close formations were essential for both effective synchronised attack and mutual defence,[149] and only belatedly did WW I military leaders adapt old methods to the realities of modern weapons.[150] Other times leaders seemed willing to sacrifice lives to gamble on a breakthrough, such as Field Marshall Hindenburg's plan in the 1918 offensive, "We'll punch a hole in their lines and see what happens."[151] Similarly, leaders can be simply arrogant about intelligence, such as Sir Redvers Buller who, on being presented with the Intelligence Department report manual about the Boers prior to his disastrous conflict with them, handed it back saying that he already "knew everything about South Africa."[152] However, political and military leaders are, usually, clearly intelligent people even if they do sometimes make bad decisions, so this idea has been abandoned from serious discussion.

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[145] See, for example, Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war."

[146] Regan, *Someone Had Blundered.*

[147] B. Alexander, *How Great Generals Win* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); G. McWhiney and P.D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982).

[148] A. Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Hutchinson, 1961).

[149] Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Michael Howard, "Men against fire: Expectations of War in 1914" *International Security* Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 3-19; McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time.*

[150] Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence.*

[151] Stephen P. Rosen, "The strategic behaviour of tyrants: A neo-classical perspective," (In prep).

[152] Christopher Andrew, "Churchill and Intelligence." In *Leaders and Intelligence*, edited by M. L. Handel. (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1989), p. 183.

8.2. Emotional or Cognitive Incompetence

Dixon proposed that emotional or cognitive incompetence of particular commanders was responsible for military incompetence.[153] He suggested that men promoted to positions of senior command are prone to risk-taking, cognitive dissonance and anti-intellectualism because, he argued, military institutions select for precisely such characteristics. However, monarchs and politicians, not subject to this bias, were responsible for the majority of conflicts throughout most of history but also committed incompetence.[154] Furthermore, groups, rather than individuals, often make decisions in war but these also result in military incompetence[155] (and as Dixon himself argues, may be particularly prone to their effects [156]). In any case, incompetence manifests itself across cultural and doctrinal divides, rejecting the idea that such a trait should be unique to western military institutions.[157]

Dixon goes on to suggest that it is particular individuals who make consistently bad decisions: "Good commanders remain pretty much the same. Likewise, bad commanders have much in common with each other."[158] But this proposition raises several objections. Even "the most able commanders have erred on occasions. Grant at Cold Harbour, Lee at Gettysburg, Fredrick the Great at Kolin, all made errors which, judged in isolation, could have earned them the title of 'incompetent'."[159] Such variation can act on the longer term too. The WW I generals, that Dixon's theory implicates, "such as Petain, Foch, and even Haig performed much better in 1917-18 than they did in the earlier years of the war. They could hardly have done so had they been encumbered with permanent mental blinkers."[160] According to Cohen and Gooch,

> "it would be easy to dismiss Dixon's theorizing as simply the kind of thing that gets psychoanalysis a bad name. In fact, a little reflection on the reality of military history provides ample refutation for his theories. Though many of the personality traits he identifies do seem to be present in some of the more notable cases of failure, it is by no means obvious

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[153] Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence.*

[154] David, *Military Blunders*; D. Judd, *Someone Has Blundered: Calamities of the British Army in the Victorian Age* (London: Arthur Barker, 1973); Perry, *Arrogant Armies*; Regan, *Someone Had Blundered*; Geoffrey Regan, *Snafu: Great American Military Disasters* (New York: Avon, 1993); Tuchman, *The March of Folly.*

[155] R.A. Hinde, "Aggression and war: individuals, groups and states." In *Behaviour, Society and International Conflict*, edited by P. E. Tetlock, J. L. Husbands and R. Jervis. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). "When a royal commission was convened in 1917 to explain the failure of the Gallipoli campaign two years earlier, Field Marshall Lord Kitchener, who had been secretary of state for war at the time, was dead. A bevy of soldiers and politicians appeared for questioning, and almost to a man they blamed Kitchener for having made the decision to undertake the campaign in the first place - thereby conveniently forgetting that it had been a communal choice." See Cohen and Gooch. *Military Misfortunes*, p. 7.

[156] These are reviewed by Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, and Wrangham, "Is military incompetence adaptive?"

[157] Tuchman, *The March of Folly.*

[158] Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, p. 18.

[159] Regan, *Someone Had Blundered*, p. 12.

[160] Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, p. 14.

that, by the same token, they are not also among the mental baggage of history's successful generals."[161]

Cohen and Gooch also point out the problem of restricting an explanation to something specific to the military:

> "If Dixon's theory were true, we would see much more evidence of incompetence - and therefore of failure - in the military world than in business, industry, or any other activity that involves controlling substantial numbers of human beings. Observation and experience suggest that competence and incompetence are much more evenly spread among those in and out of uniform than such theories would suggest."[162]

Tuchman, similarly, argued that governments, trade unions and businesses are also prone to errors of judgement, where "the exercise of judgement acting on experience, common sense and available information is less operative and more frustrated than it should be."[163] The concept of positive illusions, in contrast, is in line with the even spread of incompetence among many different contexts.

9. CONCLUSIONS

If the reader rejects the possibility that positive illusions are important in military or political contexts, they are still faced with the significant paradox that remains in the more fundamental and familiar manifestations of positive illusions. As already cited, positive illusions are a common feature in sport.[164] More than 50% of boxers believe they will win an upcoming match (even after taking into account the financial incentives). Why would they fight if they believed they would lose? Big matches are engaging precisely because it is *not* obvious who will win, different camps clamour confidently for their own side and there is rarely a consensus on who will win. Mike Tyson fought Lennox Lewis in Memphis this June. Lewis boasted that "I aim to knock him out severely"[165] Tyson's prediction was that "on Saturday night I am going to ... put a world of hurt on Lennox Lewis in a devastating and spectacular show." (Lewis won). In other sports too, competitors are typically confident of an impending success. Part of this is a deliberate show of resolve to consciously try and bolster team confidence. But in many cases it is clear that competitors on both sides really believed that they would win. It is a rarely violated fact that people *systematically* believe it is their *own* team that will win. If people were *unbiased*, only 50% of them would think so. Some or all of them are therefore apparently subject to positive illusions, which may be positive in effect, if illusive in reality. The existence of sport at all relies

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[161] Cohen and Gooch. *Military Misfortunes*, p. 9.

[162] Cohen and Gooch. *Military Misfortunes*, p. 10.

[163] Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, p. 4.

[164] Starek and Keating, "Self-deception and its relationship to success in competition."

[165] The Financial Times, 8th June, 2002.

on uncertainty in success. A similar line of argument seems relevant for understanding war. Wars also rely on uncertainty in success and for war to initiate, both sides generally need to hold a belief that they can win (whether easily or not).[166] It would be strategic to expose this belief (whether or not it is true), and to hide any evidence to the contrary. Consequently, "the cause of war cannot be simply lack of information, but whatever it is that prevents its disclosure."[167] Fearon thus argues that the two necessary conditions for a rationalist explanation for war are that leaders have: (1) private information about one's own capabilities, plus (2) "an incentive to exaggerate their true willingness or capability to fight."[168] He suggests that this process is consciously enacted by state leaderships. The positive illusions hypothesis is rather similar (and not mutually exclusive). It suggests that this same strategic advantage has selected for a base-rate cognitive bias towards concealing true capabilities and feigning confidence (one could think of it as the brain being a hardware version of Schelling's *Strategy of Conflict*). Fearon writes that:

> "It could be that the states have conflicting estimates of the likelihood of victory, and if both sides are optimistic about their chances this can obscure the bargaining range. But even if the states have private and conflicting estimates of what would happen in a war, if they are rational, they should know that there can only be one true probability that one or the other will prevail."[169]

Fearon's argument thus rests on the assumption of rationality. But it is increasingly hard to accept this assumption as satisfactory. I am writing at a time when Rational Choice Theory has been significantly challenged, and human behaviour is well-established to commonly deviate from the expectations of rationality (and sometimes the predicted 'rational' response would even be clearly foolish). Actual responses appear to originate from hard-wired emotions with ancient origins that seat them deep in the brain. At least four different disciplines are converging on the conclusion that various biological factors are essential to understand *observed* human behaviour, as opposed to that *predicted* by rational choice theory. As Matt Ridley summarised this development: "If you lack all emotions, you are a rational fool. [Antonio] Damasio [a Neurologist] makes this case without apparently knowing that economists like Robert Frank, biologists like Robert Trivers and psychologists like Jerome Kagan have come to similar conclusions from different evidence. It is a remarkable coincidence."[170] Adaptive theories for proximate mechanisms influencing decision-making, such as positive illusions, are therefore crucial for a deeper understanding of their effects, the conditions under which they occur, and how to control them. In his conclusions Fearon acknowledged that "a better understanding of

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[166] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war."

[167] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," p. 391.

[168] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," p. 395.

[169] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," p. 388.

[170] Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Origins of Cooperation* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 144. See Frank, *Passions Within Reason*; Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon, 1994).

what the assumption of rationality really implies for explaining war may actually raise our estimate of the importance of particular irrational and second-image factors."[171]

A final reason to suspect that positive illusions are likely to promote conflict is a consideration of their interaction with other documented phenomena. I already described how denial of counter information often tends to accompany positive illusions. But further empirical research shows other particularly calamitous trends: "On balance, it seems that states are more likely to overestimate the hostility of others than to underestimate it," and "states tend to infer threatening motives from actions that a disinterested observer would record as at least partly cooperative"[172] (similar biases have been recorded in bargaining behaviour[173]). These two biases "often operate simultaneously, with the result that both sides are likely to believe that they are cooperating and that others are responding with hostility."[174] Add to this the tendency via positive illusions to believe that one is superior to a rival, and one has a veritable witches brew for violence.

9.1. Can Biology Really Affect International Relations?

In 1929, Gilbert Murray argued vehemently against human nature being important in international relations:

> "The apologists for war ... get their minds badly confused because they continue to speak of war as if it were an element of human nature, like strife or fear or ambition ... The war which is formally renounced in the Pact of Paris and practically guarded against in the covenant of the League of Nations is not an instinct, it is a form of state action. It is not an element in human nature, it is part of a political programme. It is no more an instinct, or an element in human nature, than the adoption of the income tax."[175]

As with many criticisms of biological influences on behaviour, this totally misses the point. It is a behavioural *tendency* that is postulated to evolve, not complex outcomes. Yet, the latter arise through the constraints of the former - it is part of the ultimate explanation, not *the* proximate explanation. There is still sometimes a perplexing resistance to the idea that human brains have much to do with how people make decisions and implement policy. Dixon lamented that

> "Judging from the attitude of some historians, a putting together of psychology and history is, to say the least, bad form, while a putting together of psychology and military history is positively indecent ... [One] reason is a distrust of reductionism - of the idea that anything so complex as a military disaster could possibly be *reduced* to explanations in terms of the workings of the human mind, and this by a psychologist (of all people)."[176]

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[171] Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," p. 409.

[172] Jervis, "War and Misperception," p. 688-690.

[173] Bazerman, Curhan, Moore and Valley, "Negotiation."

[174] Jervis, "War and Misperception," p. 688.

[175] Gilbert Murray, *The Ordeal of This Generation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929).

[176] Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, p. 18.

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Nevertheless, it is fair to say that there is a swelling tide of theory, empirical evidence and case study verification that psychological biases are crucial to understanding international relations.[177] What is not so common is to ask the question of the *origins* of the various cognitive biases found by psychologists. We often know that they *do* occur from laboratory experiments. But we don't often know *why*. As a result, "in international relations there appears at the moment to be a far greater comprehension of the cognitive aspects of human interaction ... than of the affective aspects of human interaction - often involving reckless, daredevil, and passionate attitudes and behaviour."[178] It is my contention that evolutionary biology offers a unique avenue to improve the understanding of these "affective" aspects of behaviour. Positive illusions are a rare example of a well-documented empirical phenomenon that, at the same time, has a well-developed and intuitive theory for their biological origin and adaptive function.

In the 18th century Samuel Johnson considered the relationship between confidence and war and concluded that:

> "Mutual cowardice keeps us in peace. Were one half of mankind brave and one half cowards, the brave would be always beating the cowards. Were all brave, they would lead a very uneasy life; and would be continually fighting: but being all cowards, we go on very well."[179]

Unfortunately, it seems that Samuel Johnson was wrong about people being cowards. The world from London in 1778 may very well have seemed a cosy and charitable place, but Europe and all other parts of the world have been ravaged by war almost continuously since then. Feeding this data back into his own theory, we would have the prediction that, instead, people are commonly too brave. Perhaps it is our overconfidence that keeps us constantly at war.

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[177] For example, see Jack S. Levy, "Loss aversion, framing effects and international conflict." In *Handbook of War Studies II*, edited by M. I. Midlarsky. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), pp. 193-221; Philip E. Tetlock, "Social psychology and world politics." In *Handbook of Social Psychology*, edited by D. Gilbert, S. Fiske and G. Lindzey. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998).

[178] R. Mandel, "Psychological Approaches to International Relations." In *Political Psychology*, edited by M. G. Hermann. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), pp. 254-8.

[179] James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Penguin, 1791) 28 April 1778.