

Military Bureaucracy and Decision Making

A Public Choice Perspective

Thaddeus V. Drake Jr.

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Dedication

To my family.

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Foreword

United States Marine Corps Colonel Thaddeus Drake Jr. is a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and has authored several featured journal articles in the past few years. His extensive military leadership experience as a commander and staff officer during peacetime and at war certainly entitles and qualifies him to share his personal accounts and opinions about military bureaucracy and decision-making. Colonel Drake extensively researched James M. Buchanan's explanation of *public choice theory*, claiming that individual goals, desires, and aspirations are the primary motivations for decisions and choices made by the general population.¹ For the purpose of this book, I will categorically include senior military leaders in the spectrum of political agents; they are, after all, a “means” to resolve conflict or advance or derail national and international interests for the nation they represent. However, their personal agendas, goals, or desires clearly shape the way they do this, just like any other person. I will also make a bold claim that significant similarities exist between military leaders and the leaders of any other organization. After reading this book, I see no difference between politicians or any other leaders in terms of their personal or organizational decision-making.

Throughout my three decades of military service as an enlisted service-member, I have had first-hand experience with the caliber of people in leadership roles in the military. I have come to deeply appreciate how our military institutions cultivate future leaders from basic training, Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), and the Service academies, among others. Military leaders stand tall among the best in the world, not only because of the

¹ James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962).

training they receive but even more because of their commitment and discipline. The vast majority of our military leaders possess the ability to inspire, motivate, and navigate complex challenges with decisiveness and clarity, all while ensuring the safety and well-being of their formation. I consider myself beyond fortunate to have been guided and mentored by many of those exceptional leaders like Colonel Drake; I can proudly claim that I am a benefactor of such phenomenal influence.

I served with Colonel Drake during my time at Joint Task Force-Civil Support (JTF-CS), first as my J3 director and ultimately as my deputy commander. He knows his stuff. Although I do not particularly like his conclusions or the implications resident in the book, I think his claims are correct. I fully concur that *status and reputation* shape leadership dynamics, decision-making processes, and organizational behavior. His assessment that this is a critical concept is spot on. Understanding these terms in the context of military bureaucracy and decision-making offers insights into how leaders operate within the complex hierarchy and how their actions are perceived both within and outside the organization.

Status refers to the individual's position or rank within the organization, which is often prescribed by their title, years of experience, and achievements. In a military context, status is highly formalized and obvious. A military or a civilian who is familiar with military ranks and structures will automatically know the capacity, responsibility, and the extent of influence of a servicemember commensurate with the rank they wear. Higher status provides greater authority and access to decision-making forums. It also often brings increased influence over policy, strategy, and resource allocation. Status is essential in maintaining order and discipline within the military, as it clearly defines who makes decisions and who follows orders; however, this can become very addicting and dangerous if left unchecked. Leaders who prioritize their status and reputation, particularly pursuant toward future employment, may compromise the impartiality and integrity of their decisions, leading to outcomes that reflect personal or political considerations rather than the best interests of the military and its mission. Colonel Drake suggests this happens far more often than we would prefer.

Reputation is a balancing act between personal and organizational reputation. While any member of an organization must protect their personal standing, they also have a duty to ensure that their actions reflect positively on it. This often involves prioritizing the organization's long-term reputation

over short-term personal gains, or at least it *should*. A leader who prioritizes personal reputation over that of their organization risks compromising the integrity of their decision-making and the effectiveness of their leadership. Reputation is built based on consistency of actions (reliability and quality of work), integrity (honesty, transparency, and ethical behavior), relationships and interactions (respect toward others and effective communication), and professionalism (responsibility and accountability). Building a reputation requires intentionality, patience, and a commitment to consistently align actions with values and the image that one desires to portray. Anything opposite of this will obviously produce the complete reverse of a good reputation. Colonel Drake argues that managing reputation is one of the things military members prioritize over almost anything else.

For most of my career, I believed that every decision I made was purely driven by the task at hand, focused solely on safety and mission success. However, after exploring this book, I have changed the way I think about decision-making. Colonel Drake's discussion of military bureaucracy and decision-making has shed new light on my journey. The book revealed that my decisions were not just about the mission; they were also shaped by my own perspective and interpretations, values, and experiences. This revelation has been both humbling and enlightening for me.

While I once saw my leadership as strictly mission-oriented, I now recognize how my perspectives played a significant role in the outcomes I achieved. These factors, which I had previously overlooked, were instrumental in both my successes and failures, as they are for everyone. This realization does not diminish my pride in the leadership I exercised, but it does add a layer of self-awareness about how deeply personal motivations and beliefs intertwine with professional decision-making. The journey has been one of growth, and this newfound understanding allows me to appreciate the complexities of leadership and military decision-making in a way I had not before. *Mahalo nui loa*, Colonel Drake!

*Command Sergeant Major Erano Bumanglag,
United States Army*

Preface

This book is a labor of love. I would have written it for myself even if I knew no one would read it. Although I wrote it during the course of my year of top-level school as a military fellow in the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the subject matter has been one of my primary interest areas for at least the last decade. When I was a student at Marine Corps' Command and Staff College and the School of Advanced Warfighting in the early 2010s, I first immersed myself in the bureaucracy studies of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Anthony Downs' *Inside Bureaucracy*, Gordon Tullock's *Bureaucracy*, Francis Rourke's many works on the subject, and of course Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* (among many others). Although modern scholarship might prefer to focus on more recent works informed by these early giants, for me reading these thinkers was like someone turned on a light bulb.

Since then, I have dabbled in reading public choice theory, military sociology, cognitive and social psychology, economics, political science, and a host of related and unrelated disciplines. I have searched, in every database and pile of out-of-print books I can find, for a discussion of the military like the one I chose to write. There are certainly many screeds and polemics that rail against the military; some of them are cited in this book. I did not intend to write another of these works, however. My goal with this book was to illuminate and explain behavior that seems otherwise inexplicable. Phrased differently, perhaps, consider that in theories of military decision-making and command, military histories, and other related works we often divorce the individual from the structure; theories of military decision-making describe command structures and rational organizations while military histories happily highlight the many faults of different commanders, and most notably for

this volume, the often crushing ambition and self-focus found in commanders, decision-makers, and even individual servicemembers in most militaries from modern history. I have tried to bring these two different streams of thought together to ask, “What if they are not separate at all?” What if the basic structure and nature of military bureaucracies obviates the organizational decision-making that almost every description of military command uses as a foundational assumption?

Hopefully, this book will be of use to many different people from many varied walks of life. This is neither a fully formed nor rigorously tested political science theory, and as such I am hopeful that at some future date it could spark further research in this vein. Some early readers of the book from outside the military also suggested that they thought it applied to their career fields as well; I am hopeful that it might help some outside the military frame their thinking of decision-making and status dynamics as well. My sincerest hope, however, is that this book will land in the lap of the inquisitive mid-career officer or enlisted servicemember who is trying to understand why we are this way. There is no obvious reason the system exists and acts the way it does; yet, here it is nonetheless. As I know from experience, it can be immensely frustrating to exist in a system where you are routinely told “because we’ve always done it that way” is an unacceptable answer, and yet live and breathe a manpower management system, structure, and set of incentives that seem to exist for precisely that reason. The cybernetic management theorist Stafford Beer once wrote “the purpose of a system is what it does.”² The military system often disregards what it actually does in favor of the coherent stories told by historians and decision-making theorists. This book is an attempt to look beyond those stories. It is about exactly that dynamic and how the structure of our system interacts with our conscious and subconscious mind to make it work as it does.

It is about the flawed stories we tell ourselves about how decisions are made and how they are implemented. When you are a senior officer or leader of people, it is immensely comforting to believe that you make decisions rationally, and once the decision is made there is a cascade of action while people implement your intent, desire, guidance, or whatever else you want to call it. This is simply not the way it works. During a famous series of experiments, people whose left and right brain hemispheres were surgically

² Stafford Beer, “What Is Cybernetics,” *Kybernetes* 31, no. 2 (2002): 209–19.

severed, allowing their left and right eyes to be isolated from one another, were given directions to only one-half of their brain. When these individuals executed the tasks they were given as part of the experiments, the opposite brain hemisphere was asked why it was doing what the other hemisphere had initiated. The nonactive brain hemisphere made up a plausible causal story that was entirely false and that it completely believed. For example, in one case, the left side of the brain was told to walk across the room. When the right brain was asked why it was standing up, it replied, “I was hungry so I got up to get a snack.”³ This experience is an extreme example of a phenomenon known in neuroscience as *confabulation*. Other experiments with confabulation include episodes of brain surgeons creating action in patients using electrodes. Although the discrete action was generated by a brain surgeon’s deliberate use of an electrical impulse, the patient’s mind created a causal story about why they acted on their own.⁴ I contend this is exactly the sort of reasoning most thinkers have come up with to describe military organizations’ decisions. I argue that instead of the existing models, we can explain most military decision-making by taking a microeconomic view of organizational decision-making. Assuming that everyone in the chain is self-interested, and the interest they are seeking to maximize—either consciously or subconsciously—is their own personal status and reputation.

However, I also freely admit that there are many ways one might explain human action, and this is just one within that infinite set. My final hope is that anyone who picks up this book searching for understanding will also find within it a useful set of resources in the notes and bibliography that arrive at far different conclusions than mine. There are many ways to understand the military craft; it is literally one of the most complex and difficult of all human endeavors, and the stakes are obviously higher than any other; in only a few other activities is someone actively trying to kill you or perhaps destroy your way of life. It is my sincere hope to help advance our understanding of how decisions are made in this realm, and perhaps how we design our systems in

³ David Wolman, “The Split Brain: A Tale of Two Halves,” *Nature* 483, no. 7389 (March 2012): 260–63, <https://doi.org/10.1038/483260a>; and Edward H. F. de Haan et al., “Split-Brain: What We Know Now and Why This Is Important for Understanding Consciousness,” *Neuropsychology Review* 30, no. 2 (2020): 224–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11065-020-09439-3>.

⁴ Itzhak Fried et al., “Electric Current Stimulates Laughter,” *Nature* 391, no. 6668 (February 1998): 650–50, <https://doi.org/10.1038/35536>.

the future because of this. Some might find my interpretation cynical or even nihilistic, but it is not intended to be. I simply seek to remove the “rose colored glasses” and see things the way they are, not the way historians, theorists, or leaders might wish they were or even how much narrative and research seems to suggest they are. I have tried to approach this book by avoiding what Robert Jervis once described as “the drunkard’s search.”⁵ Instead of looking for evidence where the streetlamp shines, I have tried instead to look in the dark to find alternative explanations.

Finally, I will note that the original subtitle for the book was “The Return of Courtney Massengale.” Early reviewers recommended I change this title, as many modern readers are probably unfamiliar with the novel from which it was drawn—Anton Myrer’s *Once an Eagle*. Nonetheless, for military personnel of a certain age, this novel was both formative and yet also a bit mystifying. At least in my case, I found it sometimes difficult to reconcile what I saw every day as a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy and then as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps with the message of the book. Despite Myrer’s obvious—and somewhat one-dimensional—framing of the social climbing, conniving, and status-seeking Courtney Massengale as a villain, he seemed at least as representative of the general military population as the altruistic Sam Damon. As I will discuss briefly in chapter 4, many serving in the military have just written *Once an Eagle* off as a book that never should have been popular. I disagree. It tells a story that shows much about the military. Although there are many reasonable arguments for why there are problems with it (I cite many of them), Courtney Massengale shows military personnel the magic mirror version of themselves. As I describe in the chapters that follow, this self-interested, ambitious social climber lives in every single member of the military; indeed, its structure, human psychology, and organizational and personal needs allow it to be no other way.⁶

Although this book offers extensive evidence and sourcing, for me the most convincing evidence that there is something useful to the argument I make here is not included in the main text. When I have explained the stance and argument of the book to serving and retired servicemembers, the universal reaction of military officers and enlisted personnel alike (and I have discussed it with many) has been to agree that it is correct almost without any

⁵ Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 40.

⁶ Anton Myrer, *Once an Eagle* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968).

further question or discussion. Although this is obviously anecdotal, it does seem to resemble the U.S. Army War College's *Study on Military Professionalism* that was undertaken after the My Lai Massacre (discussed in chapter 8).⁷ This suggests to me that there is definitely room for this discussion, and it is my hope that I have illuminated an element of the Services that everyone "knows" to be the case and yet nobody can quite put their finger on. One of the book's anonymous peer reviewers noted that "status and reputation have been foundational building blocks of military activity throughout recorded history," and they suggested that this point is a bit obvious. I completely agree. However, I have yet to find a source that has sought to support it vis-à-vis modern militaries; it is more common when discussing ancient militaries.⁸ I freely admit the possibility of a research gap here, although with nearly 700 sources in the select bibliography and general references numbering well beyond that, I would hope to have found some direct mention of this phenomenon if such research existed.

The intent of this book is not finger-pointing or impugning the modern U.S. military, though. Without accounting for the reader's perspective and knowledge, the intent of this project is not—and was never—to explore the many difficulties seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, aside from noting that the way of thinking and assumptions I describe apply equally well there as the many previous wars discussed. As a result, the book deliberately eschews examples from modern wars and instead favors older conflicts. Examples from Iraq and Afghanistan are included, as they must be for any level of completeness, but I also deliberately avoid a great deal of discussion of specific individuals or events to prevent this book from becoming a response to those wars.

No book is written without help. The people who have helped with this volume are far too many to mention. My amazing wife, Haunani, has been subjected to reading hundreds of pages of my writing, almost none of which she is actually interested in. Lieutenant Colonel Ian J. Duncan (Ret), Colonel Toby Hlad, and Joe Mahoney, MD, all have my deepest thanks for their comments on some of the thoughts found in different parts of the book, as do the other 2022–23 military fellows at MIT: Colonel Lawrence Rangel, U.S. Army; Commander Michael Tomsik, U.S. Navy; Colonel John D. Turner,

⁷ *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, 1970).

⁸ For discussion of status dynamics in ancient warrior cultures, see Shannon E. French, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

U.S. Army; and Lieutenant Colonel Derrick McClain, U.S. Air Force. The faculty and staff at Marine Corps University and the MIT Security Studies Program deserve their own thanks, both for allowing me the space and time to put together these thoughts, as well as for having world-class instructors from whom I have learned so much. I should also note that MIT SSP has no responsibility for my misapplication of political science techniques or my use of a method of argumentation that has long since fallen out of vogue in the political science world. The staff at MCU Press is truly top notch, and they, too, have my sincerest gratitude for walking me through the publishing process and providing insight, wisdom, and detailed, thoughtful editing and commentary. Finally, I thank the Marines and sailors with whom I have had the privilege of serving for more than two decades; it has truly been the honor of a lifetime.

As with any work of this length, there are sure to be mistakes and flaws. All of these are my own, and none of the individuals or institutions listed here have any responsibility for any errors found herein.

Military Bureaucracy

and Decision-Making

Introduction

People have a notion that there's a top down policy making process within the executive branch. The President sits at the peak of the pyramid and sits in the oval office and issues orders and people in the bureaucracy click their heels and snap to it. That. Is. Not. How. The. Process. Works. It is a bottom-up process.

~ Michael Glennon¹

Ennoblement is earned by merit in the American Army. The depleted ranks of peers are annually replenished by fresh appointments from the ranks of its higher squirearchy, the appointments being made from a list annually prepared in the pentagonal Camelot. It is co-option with a courtly vengeance; and the new peers, the brigadiers and major generals, assume their mantles and styles with the guarded zest of the most sensitive parvenu.

~ Josiah Bunting²

During 16–30 October 1962, the world stood on the brink of nuclear war. Many have written about decision-making in the series of events that became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. Most famously, Graham T. Allison defined a genre in his book *Essence of Decision*, which used different

¹ Andrew Heaton and Michael J. Glennon, “The Actual Deep State,” Political Orphanage, podcast, 18 October 2023.

² Josiah Bunting, *The Lionheads: A Novel* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), 3.

decision-making models to try to understand the crisis.³ One of the most potentially catastrophic encounters of this episode was the interaction (and potential interaction) between Soviet submarines equipped with nuclear torpedoes and U.S. submarine-hunting destroyers and other craft. How close was the world to a nuclear exchange? Were Soviet submarine captains prepared to use their so-called “special” torpedoes? Many historians have speculated about this scenario and its possible counterfactual outcomes. What we do know is that at the height of the crisis, Captain Nikolai Shumkov of the Soviet submarine *B-130* “instructed the officer guarding the ‘special’ torpedo to flood the torpedo tube,” which is a preparatory action submarines take immediately prior to launching a torpedo. Although he later “insisted that he had no intention of firing the torpedo without a direct order,” he nonetheless was a short firing sequence—or even a mechanical malfunction—away from using the first of such weapons in anger since the United States struck the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atom bombs, and was thus likely to initiate a series of escalating nuclear exchanges.⁴

If he had no intention of actually using the weapon, why would he put his submarine, his crew, and two potentially belligerent nations in such a position? Some might suggest he was just following his orders, as was expected in the Soviet Navy and in most other military systems. Others might claim that it was purely preparing for self-defense; he was seeking to protect his submarine and his crew. Each of these seems credible; and they are also wrong. Captain Shumkov instead “wanted to show that he was prepared to do so [fire the nuclear torpedo], to impress his senior officers in Moscow when he got back.”⁵ The reason Shumkov placed the world one step closer to nuclear war was not because he thought it was necessary to protect himself or his command. It was not because he had been ordered to. It was because he calculated it was in his rational self-interest to *signal* to his chain of command that he was ready—consequences be damned. Shumkov put himself in this situation, possibly against the wishes of the Soviet military leadership,

³ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971).

⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 101.

⁵ Freedman, *Command*, 101; and Svetlana V. Savranskaya, “New Sources on the Role of Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2005): 243–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500088312>.

intending to increase his personal status and manage his reputation and that of his submarine.

Military Bureaucracy and Decision-Making tries to take an unusual perspective on military decision-making. It is, first and foremost, about how military decisions are made at all echelons. It offers a way of thinking that explains many military decisions by using a framework that has rarely been applied to the military and the people who comprise it. Second, it is about a microeconomic approach to military personnel, public choice theory, human agency, and individuals who each have their own unique and personal preferences. Finally, it incorporates recent evidence that demonstrates an understanding of the fundamental human motivation to seek social status and reputation. It is not hyperbole to suggest that social status, in all its possible incarnations, is one of the most basic drivers of human actions. These three ideas might seem unrelated and each quite complicated on its own. Nonetheless, this work will bring the three together to build a model that helps readers think about the factors that influence military decisions. This book does not purport to provide an exhaustive test of the theory it will describe; instead, it simply proposes a model that explains a great deal about military decisions while aligning almost perfectly with the emerging modern understanding of human social relationships—a complex subject if ever there was one.

Thinkers as varied as the British statistician George E. P. Box, strategist John R. Boyd, and international relations theorist Kenneth N. Waltz have written of the difficult interplay between theory and reality.⁶ In almost any work seeking to describe a particular phenomenon or element of reality there is an inherent tension between parsimony and explanation; between granularity and broad applicability. This is particularly difficult when approaching any field of study that includes human behavior. Although many have claimed to understand and predict the behavior of humans, the record of the predictions

⁶ Box famously wrote how all models of the world are wrong, but some are useful. See George E. P. Box, “Science and Statistics,” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 71, no. 356 (1976): 791–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2286841>; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010); and Frans P. B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (Cheltenham, UK: Routledge, 2006).

from the grand theories that make these claims is at best mixed.⁷ The military art is no different. As Ben Connable has recently written, “Strongly worded subjectivity and what MacGregor Knox describe as “an astounding lack of historical consciousness” dominate American military forecasting.”⁸ Nonetheless, there is clearly value in trying to describe and understand the actions of humans in a given context or situation.

There are a number of ways to approach the problem described above; the approach here will be to simply attempt to describe a phenomenon. Phrased differently, the author will articulate a description of why and how a specific group of people act the way they do and then provide a series of examples to illustrate the point. It is axiomatic that people respond to and take actions in accordance with their unique nature and in response to their specific circumstances—the so called “nature versus nurture” debate. While the debate around the ways circumstances and nature interact to create behavior and how much each one matters still roils in psychology and related fields, there are very few serious thinkers who would claim that either situational dynamics or natural influences play no role in shaping human behavior.⁹ This book takes situational dynamics as not only a given, but also as a critical element that shapes how people act, consciously and unconsciously. It also recognizes that there are “hard wired” drives that will often interact with the environment to push behavior in specific directions. It is, at its most basic, an attempt to understand and describe the way members of a hierarchy act under a particular set of constraints within a particular cultural milieu. It is neither a grand theory of human behavior nor an attempt to make a normative argument. It instead seeks to ask: “Is there a better way to explain the actions of people within the military bureaucracy than the models that currently exist?”

In short, yes. Public choice theory assumes all people are self-interested and uses this assumption to understand the political and economic behavior of groups by modeling individuals acting on their own self-interest. For very good reasons, Western militaries (and most other modern militaries) have

⁷ Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Crown Publishing, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2015). For a discussion of forecasting in the U.S. military, see Ben Connable, *Ground Combat: Puncturing the Myths of Modern War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025), 20–55.

⁸ Connable, *Ground Combat*, 20.

⁹ Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1997); and Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, reprint ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

sought to limit the ability of their servicemembers to satisfy their own self-interest in many different ways. However, there is one avenue that remains open to military personnel throughout the world: accruing and protecting personal and organizational status and reputation. The existing literature on military decision-making disregards this perspective. It takes a top-down perspective built from post-hoc historical storytelling. This book takes the opposite perspective, and it instead offers an explanation as to why and how these existing theories of military behavior and decision-making are flawed, outline the theory and evidence that should lead us to assume status and reputation as fundamental drivers of military behavior, and then provide a fast-moving survey of many examples to highlight and further develop the point.

Method and Plan for the Book

This book is neither formal political science nor a work of history. Trained political scientists and historians alike will probably be frustrated or even angry at the method of argumentation found here. This book is descriptive, applying public choice theory and several other related ways of thinking almost as heuristics. It says essentially, “Given these different theories about human behavior that are recognized as valid ways of looking at many other human organizations, what might they tell us about the military?” It does not seek to provide proof positive. Indeed, it also takes the stance that such a thing is likely impossible in social sciences and striving for it is likely to lead astray as often as provide value.¹⁰ As such, it also does not use the methodological shibboleths generally required by modern political science. Such a work would typically seek to isolate an “independent variable,” one or more “dependent variables,” describe a theory of causation, and then provide some number of detailed cases where the “hypothesis,” theory of causation, or re-

¹⁰ Hans Morgenthau, one of the earliest “realists” in international relations theory, found this to be the case. The author’s perspective here aligns with his and with Lucian Pye, one of the fathers of the security studies discipline. Pye wrote that modern social science was “worshipping a strangely distorted and graven image of science,” which “had limited utility for policy.” Quoted in Janeen M. Klinger, *Social Science and National Security Policy: Deterrence, Coercion, and Modernization Theories* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 6. For a discussion of Morgenthau’s epistemology, see Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 260, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491504>. The method in this volume is more closely aligned with what Gordon Tullock described as “understanding.” Gordon Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, ed. Charles K. Rowley, vol. 6 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 17–18.

search question might be “tested.” A different type of political science method might use a quantitative approach where some number of cases was “coded” as fitting within a category often of the researcher’s own designation, and then the numbers within the categories mined for some statistical correlation that usually “proves” the hypothesis.¹¹

Although these are time-tested approaches that modern political science has employed to great success, the current volume will not use them. Done well, these techniques can be effective. Often, however, seeking to isolate variables and apply this sort of hypothesis testing or testing a social scientific hypothesis against so called “large-n” historical sets that are literally created only through the interpretation of the “experimenter” can neglect the complex and multifaceted dynamics that affect all human decision-making and thus all social science.¹²

A recent observer (and member of the field) wrote that “most published research in political science today is scholastic—that is, it’s focused on narrow specialties with an established literature that later scholars can’t add much to. Scholars must also use increasingly rarified quantitative methods to satisfy peer reviewers for academic journals.”¹³ Instead of using the approaches they describe as currently en vogue in the political science field, the work here seeks to return to a method more commonly found in somewhat dated—but classic—works of political science, where many examples are provided to illustrate the point and are neither presented as detailed cases nor as a data set that provides some statistical findings. Modern political science generally denigrates this approach as “unscientific” and often dismissively describes it as “argumentation by example.” However, this sort of “cloud of example” presentation is found in some of the most important works in the political science canon, and more importantly, the author submits that even modern “scientific” approaches to social scientific problems also argue by ex-

¹¹ For in-depth discussions of modern political science methods, see David E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Method Approaches*, 3d ed. (London: Routledge, 2020); and Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹² For an in-depth treatment of this debate, see Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, ed., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

¹³ Lawrence M. Mead, “The Education of Robert Putnam,” *National Affairs*, no. 57 (Fall 2023).

ample; they often just tend to provide a greater veneer of formal method.¹⁴

To be sure, this is not to suggest that there is no causal theory to be found in this book. Indeed, a theory of causation is clearly presented: that self-interested actors, maximizing status and reputation, are responsible for shaping and affecting most decisions within the military chain. This is a bottom-up theory of causation, arguing that the aggregate combination of individual agents' decisions is what creates organizational action, and not the other way around. Is it possible to develop a scientific approach to testing this theory? Perhaps. Nonetheless, that is not the focus here. Indeed, this study does not claim to be conducting science in any form, but only describes a phenomenon. Although many in the field of political science or the social sciences more broadly might argue that it is possible to scientifically test such a theory, this work does not ascribe to that approach and intends to leave it to the reader to determine if the evidence presented and real-world illustrations of it pass muster.

Some might dispute or find flaws with the statement that military servicemembers are self-interested. It is reasonable to argue against this idea, as it generally "feels" wrong. However, Chapters 3 and 4 present extensive evidence that supports the assumption of self-interested humans along with the specific type of self-interest posited to be important for military servicemembers. More importantly, though, the reader should note that self-interest in public choice theory is NOT a variable this work is trying to "prove." Rather, it is a foundational assumption that the field makes and that the current work takes to be correct in general. Indeed, the author considers the question "If we assume military actors to be self-interested, what behavior should we see?"

¹⁴ An extreme version of this argument is found in Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, trans. Steven Sampson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511810503>. Michael Desch has also described in detail the tension between adherence to rigorous method and broad relevance. See Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 10. When asked by the author, most political scientists readily proclaim that many legendary works of political science such as Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 2d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1988); and many others, would not be published today within the field. Nonetheless, thoughtful observers will recognize that important insights are to be found in them. Here, the author suggests only that strict adherence to method is not the sole arbiter of utility.

Chapters 3–5 describe the science and evidence to support the assumption, and then chapters 6–8 show examples of exactly the behavior we would expect if the assumption is accurate.

This volume neither seeks to prove a hypothesis nor necessarily build a deterministic theory. Instead, it intends to show a scatter plot of examples from Western militaries during the past century, using examples that illustrate the key point: that military decisions are shaped from the bottom up by personal and organizational self-interest, usually focused on status and reputation. Although the data set is necessarily incomplete, the author argues that it is representative enough to build a descriptive theory. There are numerous counterarguments to this, including that they “cherry picked” examples or in the parlance of political science that they are guilty of “selecting on the dependent variable.” Perhaps more generally, one might argue that the correlation shown—self-interest, status seeking, and reputation management at every level of warfare in many different armies—cannot be proven as causation, given the difficulty of proving individual motivations. This is entirely fair. The author endeavors to avoid this by looking at a broad cross section of examples and ensuring that every case is supported by both primary source materials and analysis from multiple historians or other experts, but this is nonetheless a reasonable critique. As there is no way to scientifically prove a case, however, it is left to the reader to determine if sufficient evidence was presented to render these claims plausible.

A note to the reader: this book is deliberately over-sourced. Because of its cross-disciplinary nature, the author assumes that readers will encounter source material they are generally unfamiliar with. To help mitigate this issue, an extensive number of footnotes, often discursive, are used to articulate where and how to find the source for a given idea. Citations will also include multiple works that address similar ideas where practicable. Finally, in many places, particularly in the early chapters, significant effort was made to return to the originators of many ideas instead of focusing on modern scholarship that builds on them. This volume is intended to illuminate a specific subject and argument, but also to help point readers toward research that they may not have previously been aware of.

The book proceeds in two parts, with 12 total chapters. Part 1 describes the various elements of the theory and explains the basic reasoning, while part 2 highlights examples of these dynamics in major wars of the twentieth century as well as during peacetime. In the first chapter, the book addresses

what the author describes as the myth of military decision-making. It first broadly describes the scholarship on modern decision-making approaches and then outlines many existing theories of military decision-making. There are, of course, a number of military decision-making theories; this work will not even scratch the surface of this literature. It will use several different approaches to military decision-making to shape the discussion in the rest of the book, but the reader should not expect an exhaustive treatment of decision-making theories. This chapter focuses on some of the most common and popular theories and seeks to explain the way the approach here is different. Most military decision-making theories, whether focused on the leader or the unit level, share several foundational assumptions that are unhelpful at best. They make theories easier to develop, align with historical treatments, and are generally comforting, but nonetheless do not fit well with the empirical record.

After describing the myth of military decision making in chapter 1, the book expands on the background for the theoretical approach. This chapter assumes that most military readers will not be steeped in the history or context of public choice theory and it is thus helpful to provide some depth on the topic. It explains public choice and agency theories and describes in more detail some of the critical assumptions outlined in the introduction and chapter 1. These theoretical foundations provide the background for the following chapters, where the specific argument will be discussed in greater detail. This chapter also begins a discussion of a curious phenomenon: although generally seen as unobjectionable by most and in some ways “baked in” to U.S. government bureaucracies, public choice thinking and related theories have rarely been applied directly to the military bureaucracy, despite the fact that the military is the largest government agency in the nation, and thus by many metrics one of the largest bureaucracies in the history of the world.¹⁵ This discussion continues into the following chapter.

Chapter 3, “Military Bureaucracy,” outlines the framework used in the remainder of the book to discuss military bureaucracy and explains why the

¹⁵ For example, see “The World’s Largest Employers,” WorldAtlas, accessed 30 October 2024. Although the specific numbers change over time, they remain approximately correct. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has been the world’s largest employer for many years. In the author’s framing, *every* member of the DOD is a part of the bureaucracy, and thus DOD is also one of the largest bureaucracies in the history of the world.

military system is unlike any other public agency or other bureaucracy and, more importantly, why its *members* are unlike other such organizations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of why servicemembers are likely to be *status and reputation maximizing* more than any other bureaucratic motivation.

In chapter 4, the reader will find a discussion that briefly explains and further surveys the cross-disciplinary evidence surrounding status and reputation in humans and applies it more directly to military contexts. There is much recent scholarship on these topics; the chapter will not exhaustively cover it, but it will instead provide a broad discussion of this scholarship as it relates to the theory. Finally, chapter 5 outlines the broad contours of the principal-agent problem and why it is significant for the application of this theory.

Following the discussion in part 1, the book will transition to illustrating the theory, articulating examples of how the idea of status and reputation maximizing and the principal-agent problem apply at each echelon of command. It will generally use the framing of strategic-operational-tactical levels of war to discuss how and where these issues apply. This discussion also considers how these dynamics affect the individual soldier, sailor, airman, guardian, or Marine on a battlefield or in a garrison environment. A note to the reader: this part assumes a reasonable familiarity with the military history of the twentieth century. It endeavors to provide enough information in each example or vignette to make general sense to the lay reader, but it does not deeply explore the background of any of the cases provided.

Finally, in chapter 9, the book describes the implications of the theory. If in fact members of the military hierarchy are generally considered to be status and reputation maximizing above other utility maximizing concerns, what might militaries need to think about? It considers many of the problems military status dynamics create in the current environment. This chapter will also briefly address some of the counterarguments this framing is likely to generate.

Although the two parts of the book are complementary, they are also able to stand on their own. Readers who are less interested in the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience behind the case made for status and reputation maximizing can easily skip much of part 1 without losing track of the discussion. Readers who are familiar with the general approach and background of public choice theory or who are willing to accept at face value the author's in-

tent to use a bottom-up, microeconomic approach might wish to skip chapter 2. Conversely, readers who have little interest in the historical vignettes and examples that illustrate the cases made in part 1 can skip much of part 2 without missing the basic premise of the book.

A brief aside about military hierarchies. This book is mainly focused on the United States military for several reasons. First, the author is a serving officer in the United States military, so that is far and away where their expertise and qualifications lie. Second, it is not hyperbole to argue that the U.S. military dominates almost every other Westernized military in the twenty-first century, whether in materiel, number of commitments, size, or influence. Many bemoan the diffusion of U.S. processes, thinking, and culture into other nations' militaries; the author does not take a normative position on this, but instead simply approaches it as an existing fact.¹⁶

Although the study primarily focuses on the U.S. military, where useful, it also highlights examples from different militaries during the same period, both at war and at peace. This clearly broadens the pool of available examples while also diluting the America-centric argument. However, every military this book presents as an example is structured as a Weberian hierarchy, and thus supports the general argument. Nonetheless, readers should keep in mind that the author's primary focus is the military with which they are most familiar, although it stands to reason that many of the arguments made here would be easily overlaid on the various military systems found throughout the developed world.

The study endeavors to use examples from all of the United States' major twentieth century conflicts, although even this set might be disputable (e.g., whether a conflict qualifies as major might depend on the hypothesis a given political scientist seeks to prove or disprove or the story a particular historian is trying to describe). In the interest of brevity it has also neglected the finer details of almost all of these. Both of these acts—using a broad swath of conflicts while also painting with a “broad brush” many of the details within them—are often considered by many in the military history-adjacent world to be unforgivable sins. This problem grows exponentially as one expands the scope of conflicts beyond a single nation. In any such endeavor, the cases used will be subject to dispute regarding how they were chosen, why certain “edge

¹⁶ For example, see Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (London: John Murray, 1996), 583.

cases” were not considered, and why specific—and often very important details—did not receive full treatment. This is a valid criticism. However, for the purposes of the current volume, the cases mentioned are sufficient to illustrate the point. They are not included to prove the general theory outlined, as seeking to prove theories or hypotheses in such a manner is nigh impossible. Instead, the cases described provide a conceptual scatter plot, with the intent being to look at them and see if an idea might align with the data points described. The axiom “correlation does not equal causation” is useful here; this study does not attempt to prove causation, only to highlight what seems to be a clear correlation and present a possible explanation for it.¹⁷

Finally, this book might appear to be profoundly cynical. It is not, by intent, although it is certainly skeptical of existing models for military decision-making. It is an effort to understand the world as it is and not as we might like it to be. During the past 50 years, voluminous literature in a broad array of disciplines has shown the problems with incentives and interests in hierarchies. The military, as the prototypical hierarchy, has curiously been somewhat immune to many of these studies. Although management thinking has often “cross pollinated” with military operations, it has not always done so with optimal results.¹⁸ Instead of simply “grafting on” theories of management that may align with the uniqueness of military culture, this book seeks to start from first principles; it uses the basic assumptions of public choice theory and asks,

If we assume that people are self-interested and generally try to maximize things that they interpret—either through deliberate calculation or without conscious thought—as good for themselves, then what is it that members of the military seek to maximize?

Do they somehow think and decide differently than members of other bureaucracies?

If so, does that mean the narratives we retroactively construct to describe military actions are wrong?

¹⁷ The term *correlation does not equal causation* is most commonly attributed to English statistician and mathematician Karl Pearson in the early 1910s, though some evidence points to use of the concept as early as 1880.

¹⁸ Leo McCann, “‘Killing Is Our Business and Business Is Good’: The Evolution of ‘War Managerialism’ from Body Counts to Counterinsurgency,” *Organization* 24, no. 4 (2017): 491–515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417693852>.

Do the ways we build these stories into decision-making theories provide a flawed or even false picture of how decisions are made?

If is the answer to these questions might be yes, then that understanding can help shape structures, incentives, and other methods of achieving greater effectiveness in all domains of military operations. Sun Tzu might implore us to know ourselves and our enemy; as a general rule, any human should certainly strive to be better at both.¹⁹ By foregrounding self-interest, status, and reputation as prime motivations for servicemembers, this book seeks improves our understanding of ourselves, including why members of military bureaucracies decide to do what they do, and perhaps in so doing provide some ability to mold a more effective fighting force.

¹⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).

Part 1

The Argument

Part 1 describes the argument, reviews several of the most well-known existing models of military decision-making, and lays out the social science, hard science, and other scholarly evidence that suggests military members should not only be as susceptible to status and reputation dynamics as the general population, but that they should in fact be *more* status seeking and reputation protecting than the average individual. This is of course a claim about averages in the population writ large, not one about specific individuals or even positions within the military hierarchy. As with any population, we should expect to see outliers in the normal distribution, and of course we will. This work takes the position that individuals matter and understanding average distributions across the entire population is insufficient to understand the behavior of organizations, while also recognizing the need to generalize in some way.¹

Importantly here, the readers are reminded that the goal of this book is not rigorous political-science style hypothesis testing. Although there is certainly utility in that style of presentation, it will not be applied here. Many have alleged that social sciences might be approached with the same degree of certainty and determinism that is typically found in the hard sciences; indeed, this line of thought has been responsible for many of the developments in international relations theory during the last several decades.² Although many in political science, economics, and other related fields believe deterministic

¹ For an in-depth discussion of averages versus specifics in social science approaches, see Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

² Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*.

and rigorously proven theories are possible and to be lauded, the author does not. This book is a far more modest project. Instead of attempting to isolate variables and test hypotheses in a poor analog to the natural sciences, it instead presents a general argument, explains the scientific and social evidence that buttresses it as broadly plausible, and then shows the reader a large number of historical cases that seem to align with the evidence. This is certainly *not* the preferred method of political scientists, who focus on methodological rigor as a critical test for the usefulness of a theory. Instead, this book presents an idea that seems to be supported by the evidence. If the reader leaves this volume accepting that the idea presented seems plausible, then this effort has been successful.

The Argument

First and foremost, this book is meant to address the question “What if our ideas of military decision-making are just a type of large-scale confabulation?” Almost all of the existing models of organizational military decision-making anthropomorphize the process, using an often unspoken, but always present, analogy that military action resembles the brain and parts of the body. Higher-level command and control structures are like the brain, making important decisions for action that are then transmitted to the different parts of the system, which execute as they are told.³ What if this is simply not the case? It certainly appears to be so, based on histories, records, and the myriad descriptions of how military leaders and leadership have won and lost wars. This book posits that these models and descriptions are a type of mythology or large-scale confabulation; the “myth” of military decision-making.

When approaching the question of military decision-making models, this book intends to address a hole in the bureaucracy literature in some small part. It argues that using a microeconomic approach, the record appears to show that military decisions are not just made by the centralized brain and executed by a mass of automatons who adhere to the guidelines they are given, but instead that each individual is constantly acting in accordance

³ For one of the earliest direct articulations of this line of thought, see Col J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018). For a more modern use, see Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 8. This is a common analogy in other hierarchies as well. For usage outside the military sphere, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

with their preferences.⁴ It intends to apply the thinking found in the broad category of organizational analysis known as public choice theory as well as associated disciplines and related theoretical foundations to examine the military bureaucracy and how decisions are made by the people who comprise it.⁵ Public choice theory was an initiative that came into its own during the 1960s and 1970s, although it continues as its own discipline and influences related fields today. At its heart, it was an effort to use the tools and thinking of economics (particularly microeconomics) to understand political problems. The public choice literature is voluminous, and this book does not intend to address anywhere near the entirety of the research. Instead, it seeks to frame the actions of individuals in military bureaucracies through the lens of this theory. Particularly, it will seek to model military actions using the foundational assumptions that:

- Using the framing of Nobel laureate Herbert A. Simon, all people are “boundedly rational” actors who have specific, individual, and unique preferences.⁶
- People will seek to maximize utility within the available set

⁴ Different military decision models allow widely varying ideas about the autonomy of subordinate units and decision-makers. These ideas will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

⁵ There are many varieties of what is often known as public choice theory. This broad theory has periodically fallen under the rubric of public choice, social choice, rational choice theory, and political economy, and elements of many other organizational theories are often associated with this literature as well. For example, see Dennis C. Mueller, “Public Choice, Social Choice, and Political Economy,” *Public Choice* 163, nos. 3/4 (2015): 379–87, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-015-0244-0>; and Patrick Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice: Economic Approaches in Political Science* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁶ For bounded rationality, see Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1997), 88–89. Gloria Origgi, *Reputation: What It Is and Why It Matters*, trans. Stephen Holmes and Noga Arikha (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2017), 30, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400888597>. Importantly, the term *rationality* should not be taken to connote anything other than the most minimal definition of the term. A boundedly rational actor in this sense is someone who seeks to maximize utility within a set of reasonable options. This is very different than the colloquial use of the term, which is often used to mean “what I think the smartest course of action should have been,” “given all the information we know now, with hindsight what an actor ought to have done,” or most commonly in modern political science, “given perfect information, the optimal decision that should have been made.” For the most famous example of the hyper-rationalist approach in political science, see James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379–414, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033324>. One recent work, that this author agrees with, describes the idea of rationality as “a constraint placed on theories or models that aspire to explain and predict the behavior of agents.”

of options bounded rationality allows. This may happen either consciously or unconsciously.

- People respond to incentives.
- Far from being immune to these issues, individuals within the military are in some ways more susceptible to them than many military decision-making and organization theorists might otherwise allow.

As one of the most perceptive students of military sociology, Morris Janowitz, described more than 50 years ago in his classic *The Professional Soldier*, “clearly, the political behavior of the military, like that of any large organization, is grounded in strong elements of personal and organizational self-interest; this can be taken for granted.”⁷ Ultimately, this book makes one main argument with two subordinate parts. First, it will argue that existing ideas of military decision-making do not take this for granted, and instead ignore the agency of individual members of the military bureaucracy. They are thus in large part inaccurate; indeed, they perpetuate a myth. Contrary to existing ideas, members of the military bureaucracy should be understood as humans who each have individual preferences in accordance with the basic assumptions outlined above and also that there are elements to the military that make actors within its bureaucratic environment unique in some ways. Because of a mix of the incentive structures inherent to the United States’ all volunteer force, cultural factors common to militaries in general, external factors such as who joins the Service, and structural elements like the hierarchical nature of service, members of the military bureaucracy do not maximize utility in the same way as many other members of government or private bureaucracies. Instead, members of the military bureaucracy maximize very specifically; they generally seek to maximize personal and organizational *status and reputation*, or personal or organizational standing relative to one’s peers and how one is known or thought of by other actors.

In the case of the military, it is almost certain that the individuals who remain in service the longest, and thus have the highest rank, necessarily attain the most status and have the greatest reputations; indeed, rank is one of the most obvious status markers for military organizations. However, it is less likely that the sheer longevity of a given servicemember is responsible for

⁷ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier, a Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1964), 285.

their increased status and reputation. Selection effects are significant in this regard, and it is likely that those who desire to remain in service the longest and continue to advance to the top of the hierarchy are also those who have the greatest sensitivity to their own personal status and reputation. While something of a “chicken or egg” question, it is nonetheless worth posing. The conventional thought within and around the military would be that the system is a meritocracy, where the best individuals rise to the top. Because they are the best, they accrue status and reputation. This book questions that narrative and instead asks, “What if individuals rise to the top because they are the ones who are most able to accrue status and protect their reputation?”

Second, this book will argue that this particular type of utility maximization pairs with the extremely rigid vertical hierarchy of the military to create a cascading set of principal-agent problems that are seldom discussed or examined, although many of the most perceptive military theorists have at least alluded to them. The principal-agent problem is common in public choice literature, although it is also a key element of a stand-alone theory known as agency theory.⁸ Much of the agency theory literature focuses on dyads that deal with only two people: the “principal,” who has a specific goal in mind, and their “agent,” who the principal tasks to achieve this goal. This study endeavors to apply this framework to a far broader set of relationships, seeking to understand military hierarchies as a set of interlocking principal-agent problems. At each echelon, individuals might be principals, they might be agents, and usually they are both. This results in significant management problems that studies of military staffs or structure more broadly have rarely considered in depth.⁹

Finally, the two dynamics articulated above—status and reputation maximizing and the way they manifest in interlocking principal-agent problems throughout the military hierarchy—can explain military activities from the highest echelons of the bureaucracy to the actions of the lowliest individual private on the battlefield. Instead of the standard brain-body, top-down, macroeconomic approach, a microeconomic-style approach—applying the ideas of public choice theory that encourage observers to understand members of bureaucratic organizations as individuals who have agency, desires, and the

⁸ Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, “Agency Theory: An Assessment and Review,” *Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (1989): 57–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258191>.

⁹ For an additional review of principal agent literature and a discussion of its potential application in hierarchies, see Susan P. Shapiro, “Agency Theory,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 263–84, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122159>.

ability to make decisions for themselves—offers a useful corrective to understand actions in the historical record that might otherwise seem inexplicable or strange.

Although this work does not claim this idea to be an all-encompassing theory of military decision-making, it does offer significant explanatory power. There are any number of occasions in military life (as any other aspect of life) where someone's actions do not seem to make sense within the existing behavioral model we use for them. This book provides an explanation for why that happens within the military hierarchy. Of course, there are many explanations for why people take the actions they do; indeed, there are literally an infinite number of theories yet to be articulated that might explain them.¹⁰ Theories are important because the way we understand a something shapes how we seek to develop, manage, and improve it. Status and reputation maximization and the principal-agent problem are obviously not the only way to understand military decisions and actions; many thinkers have presented useful alternative theories. This book suggests, however, that this framework provides both a compelling explanation and useful way of understanding these decisions that might help mitigate future issues and ultimately make the military force more capable of defending the nation. Ultimately, that is the critical task.

It is important to note, however, that the author does not claim in any way that *every* decision a military actor makes is focused only on increasing their status or protecting their reputation. Indeed, no theory of human behavior can claim to explain more than the barest majority of human decisions, and this is no different. If it is successful at explaining even 51 percent of the decisions military actors make, then it is an effective theory. Additionally, even though status and reputation maximizing cannot possibly explain all decisions made by military actors, the larger framework and assumptions of public choice theory hold true in most situations within the military environment: self-interested behavior is likely to explain much more than previous thinkers have given it credit for. Many readers will perhaps find themselves thinking, “Yes, but what about this person I know who made a decision that was obviously bad for them but favored their family?” Or they might also think, “I know a military officer who cares nothing about their reputation!” There are many individual anecdotes that one might bring to mind that seem to falsify the framing here; however, these individual anecdotes are

¹⁰ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

outweighed by the totality of decisions the military environment forces on its members. It is obviously the case that any one individual could opt for a course of action or decision that clearly undermines their status or reputation, that is not in dispute. However, most of the time we should expect members of the military to choose in accordance with the incentives the organization presents them: status and reputation.

Chapter 1

Military Decision-Making and Public Choice

Long years of military experience, confirmed by the wisdom of old age, had told him that one person cannot control hundreds of thousands of men fighting to the death, and he knew that the fate of battles is not decided by orders from the commander-in-chief, nor by the stationing of troops, nor the number of cannons or enemies killed.

~ Leo Tolstoy¹¹

The old “drum and trumpet” school of military historians tended to write of “Great Captains,” their insights and their inspirational switches of attack. Such an approach to the great industrial conflicts—where railways, coal, steel output and chemical production were the material foundations—is not only inappropriate but actually misleading.

~ John Hussey¹²

This chapter makes the case that the entire edifice of thought about military decision-making is flawed. In it, we will consider some of the most well-known models of military decision-making and discuss how an approach that takes a “micro” perspective is likely more accurate and descriptive than the existing “macro” perspectives. Instead of assuming servicemembers to be automatons who execute higher plans and orders without deciding at their

¹¹ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, deluxe ed., trans. Anthony Briggs (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 894.

¹² John Hussey, “Portrait of a Commander-in-Chief,” in Brian Bond and Nigel Cave, eds., *Haig: A Re-Appraisal 80 Years On* (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), 12–36.

own level, we will instead describe a thought process that considers service-members throughout the bureaucracy as self-interested, maximizing their personal or their unit's status and reputation. This perspective provides both a corrective and more useful model for understanding what actually happens inside military organizations. This chapter considers, "What if our existing way of looking at military organizational decision-making is really just a type of confabulation?" What if instead of top-down, organizational decisions synchronizing the actions of each member like the fictional *Star Trek: The Next Generation* hive race of the Borg, military organizations tell themselves a story about unified action that does not actually describe the motivations, actions, or decisions actually taken by each individual, much the same way the human brain often does about the motivations and actions of the body?¹³

The study of bureaucracy and organizations more generally has long approached organizational decisions and decision-making as a holy grail. As long as humans have organized into different groups, they have debated ideas of how to best make decisions within those groups. Whether the ancients of the Mediterranean, the Han dynasty in China (206 BCE–220 CE), or modern military bureaucracies such as those created by the Prussians in the aftermath of their defeat at the hands of Napoléon in 1806, the "best" way for organizations to make decisions has long been an important field of study. In the modern era, there are many different competing schools of thought about decision-making in organizations, or as *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Decision Making* describes, there are several "persistent themes" and many other "nascent themes."¹⁴ These remain extremely important in both the business and military worlds; however, in both of these the record of failure is significant. Although organizational decision theories continue to provide plentiful guidance on how the people who make up organizations should make the best decisions for their group, some of the most faithful adherents to these different theories continue to make enormously flawed decisions.¹⁵

¹³ For a book length treatment of this phenomenon, see William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, an imprint of MIT Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1660.001.0001>.

¹⁴ Gerard P. Hodgkinson and William H. Starbuck, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Decision Making* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Academic, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199290468.001.0001>.

¹⁵ For failure in the business world, see Paul C. Nutt, *Why Decisions Fail: Avoiding the Blunders and Traps that Lead to Debacles* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002). For a discussion of military failures, see Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2006).

This is true whether we consider the U.S. military's misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, Fortune 500 failures in the 2008 financial crisis, or day-to-day missteps that are all too common in the business, government, and other organizational literature.¹⁶ In the framing of this volume, it is reasonable to ask if the problem is in the misapplication of existing decision theories, or more likely, if the theories themselves are flawed.

The most crucial decision-making theme for the current volume is known as rational choice. As will be discussed in-depth in the following chapters, economic ideas of rational choice entered the conversation on political or organizational decision-making during the middle of the twentieth century. The basic concept is simple: "it practically implies an assumption whereby individuals (or collective actors) are deemed to seek (i.e. have preferences/desires for) a best (i.e. with the maximum expected benefit net of costs) outcome they can secure, given the range of feasible opportunities they believe they face."¹⁷ However, there are two important caveats. First, the basic definition of rationality is far from clear. As a team of historians and economists wrote in their history of the idea of rationality, "a many-sided debate about the nature of rationality and irrationality has been raging at the interfaces of psychology and philosophy, economics, and biology since the mid-1980s."¹⁸ Here we will use the definition described above, while also recognizing that there are many possible definitions of *rational choice*.¹⁹

Second, there is significant difference between the *microeconomic* rational

¹⁶ One recent book describes the systems responsible for these failures as an "unaccountability machine." See Dan Davies, *The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions—and How the World Lost Its Mind* (London: Profile Books, 2024).

¹⁷ Peter Abell, "Rational Choice Theory and the Analysis of Organizations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sociology, Social Theory, and Organization Studies: Contemporary Currents*, ed. Paul Adler et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 320, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199671083.013.0014>.

¹⁸ Paul Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 178.

¹⁹ For example, Thomas G. Mahnken of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University sets the bar for rationality much lower, simply stating that "strategic rationality" is defined by having some end goal in mind and developing a deliberate strategy for attaining it. Even when using the lower standard Mahnken describes, most of the examples in part II cannot be considered rational from an organizational (instead of personal) standpoint. Thomas Mahnken, "Episode 131: Thomas Mahnken on Thinking Strategically," in School of War Podcast, 2024; and Thomas Mahnken and Joshua Baker, "Fallacies of Strategic Thinking in the Ukraine War," in *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, ed. Hal Brands (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024).

choice viewpoint taken by public choice theory and other individual-focused theorists and the generally *macroeconomic* viewpoint that thinkers usually apply to large organizations, including the government and national economies. Although there remains much debate surrounding the difference, if any, between individual rational choice and collective rational choice, in much of the military literature these distinctions are blurred if made at all.²⁰

Proponents of organizational rational choice (and macroeconomic viewpoints more generally) essentially discount the importance of individual decisions within the organization; with some, like American Nobel Prize winner and economist Milton Friedman, maintaining the stance that “economic theory does not have to describe firms’ *actual* behaviors as long as it helps economists to *analyze* firms’ behaviors,” an approach that informed the military decision theorizing of Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling.²¹ As Friedman and Schelling (among many others) saw it, macroeconomic thought is generally of the opinion that understanding, predicting, or explaining specific inputs (individual behaviors) does not matter as long as the broader understanding of the organization seems to make sense, simplifies individual behaviors sufficiently to allow for the development of broad theories, and has some apparent predictive value.²² This is important, as it very much resembles the approach taken by most military decision-making scholarship. It is an enormous oversimplification that enables *ex post* explanation—the confabulation

²⁰ For the distinction between individual and collective rational choice, see Mary Zey, *Rational Choice Theory and Organizational Theory: A Critique* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 13–19, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483326863>.

²¹ Milton Friedman, *Essays in Positive Economics* as cited in Hodgkinson and Starbuck, *Oxford Handbook of Organizational Decision Making*; and Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 164. Note that Friedman’s views were far more complex and varied than this quote suggests. His general viewpoint aligned far more with the approach of this volume, claiming essentially that “There is no analysis of the company as a decision-making system, just individuals making decisions.” Davies, *The Unaccountability Machine*, 207. Also see Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²² Since the 2008 financial crisis, there has been much debate on the *actual* predictive value of macroeconomic theories. This is beyond the scope of the present volume and will only be discussed tangentially.

described earlier—but rarely explains the granular reality.²³ We will discuss this in-depth later in the chapter.

According to *The Oxford Handbook*, other “themes” common in organizational decision making include behavioral decision theory, simple mental model (cybernetic) theory, adaptive decision making, politically aware decision making, and environmental or structural factors in decision making, perhaps most popularized as structuration theory (although there are several different renderings of this way of thinking). There are many other versions of these different ideas about decision making and many more ideas that fall within the broad scope of decision making in organizations. The specifics of each of these theories are beyond the scope of the current work, although it is nonetheless important to recognize that each has much to offer to those who consider the different factors that affect decision making in organizations. However, although each of these theories helps understand many of the different ways to frame decision making within organizations and unique factors that influence it, the author disputes much of the premise of purposive organizational behavior in general. Whereas most of these theories provide useful thought regarding the context of decisions and how they are shaped, a great deal of organizational decision-making literature is actually focused on individuals without admitting it. Indeed, it is almost solely focused on those who are considered the “key decision makers” and how they direct their organizations. This book goes one step further and argues that, although context is important and high-level individuals within organizations absolutely make decisions that have wide ranging effects, the idea of treating an organization as if it is a person making a unitary decision is unhelpful. It often obscures more than it illuminates.

The current volume uses insights from many of these different models, while also contesting their most basic assumption. Although it can obviously be useful to analyze organizational behavior as if organizations are unitary actors (essentially the macroeconomic approach described by Friedman above), military decision-making literature is massively skewed in this direction.²⁴

²³ For a discussion of this issue, see Duncan J. Watts, *Everything Is Obvious: *Once You Know the Answer—How Common Sense Fails* (New York: Crown Business, 2011), 27–28; and Alan P. Kirman, “Whom or What Does the Representative Individual Represent?,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 6, no. 2 (May 1992): 117–36, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.6.2.117>.

²⁴ For further discussion of the unitary or representative actor approach, see Watts, *Everything Is Obvious*, 66–67.

Human actors within the military bureaucracy are all (semi)rational actors, but that does not mean that the larger organization should be treated as a unitary rational actor. Military decisions are not made by the “brain” of the organization and then executed by the individual actors within it without applying their preference or desire. Organizational rational choice in this regard is a flawed model, and as Friedman described, it aids only those who analyze behavior instead of those who actually participate in it or those who seek to change it.

This creates a paradox however. Perceptive readers will note that this logically leads to criticizing a rational choice decision-making model, while applying what is usually considered a rational choice decision-making model (public choice theory). That is exactly right. Individual rational choice models and organizational rational choice models are difficult to reconcile, as organizational rational choice represents precisely the sort of collective action and preference aggregation problem that will be briefly discussed in the next chapter. Individuals who have their own unique preferences make their own decisions, and often they may not align with organizational preferences; behavior within the military hierarchy is more usefully understood as the aggregation of these decisions instead of as a unified organism like an insect colony where all participants have no preferences outside of those given to them by their leadership. Furthermore, individual decisions should only be considered rational in the sense that they usually maximize some specific utility, and not that they are deliberate, show some clear intentionality, or any form of thoughtful, purposive selection between alternatives. In that sense, one might consider this description of decision making more of a hybrid; although the author accepts without question the public choice approach of utility maximization, it will become clear in the following pages that structural and behavioral dynamics greatly shape the way this applies in the military context. First, though, we will transition to a brief description of the application of public choice to military decision making.

Public Choice and the Military

A broad understanding of public choice theory has made its way into the cultural zeitgeist in recent years in the United States and other Western democracies. If not widely recognized as correct, this general understanding of public choice has, at minimum, had the effect of providing the public with alternative explanations for many government activities. We will discuss

many of the specific nuances and history of public choice theory in the following chapter; for the moment, it suffices to outline the broad ideas. First, effective analysis of organizational behavior stems from understanding that organizations are made of individuals, who each have their own preferences and desires. Second, individuals will seek to maximize their own unique preferences even if they do not consciously realize they are doing it. And finally, there is no unitary organization making decisions; instead, each organization should be understood to take actions based on a complex reconciliation of those within it who advocate for different actions based on their own desires and self-interest. As political scientist Richard Ned Lebow wrote, “Important policy decisions are very rarely the result of a single consideration or cause.” He goes on to explain how even the most important decisions are a mix of parochial problems, consensus building, and how many incentives align to support a given decision.²⁵

Although this line of thought has often been associated with right-leaning or conservative thinkers in the American context, it is far from a political ideology and should not be misconstrued as such.²⁶ Public choice theory is instead a useful way of thinking about governments, government agencies, and other large organizations, regardless of one’s political motivation or affiliation.²⁷ Since public choice became a mainstream discipline in the later part of the twentieth century, elements of the theory have made their way into governments worldwide. Most notably, many restrictions on bureaucracies and individuals within them might be attributed to public choice thinkers, and more importantly, many politicians, think tanks, and public intellectuals have integrated its fundamental assumptions—

²⁵ Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: 40th Anniversary Revised Edition* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan Switzerland, 2020), 96, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43443-4>.

²⁶ Patrick Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice: Economic Approaches in Political Science* (London: Routledge, 1991), 5, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315835228>.

²⁷ For example, Michael Munger, director of the Program in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Duke University wrote that Karl Marx anticipated “three areas of ‘public-choice’ theory.” See Michael C. Munger, “Was Karl Marx a Public-Choice Theorist?” *Independent Review* 24, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 509–20. Others have claimed instead that public choice theory is a far-right conspiracy. For example, see Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017). This book generally adopts the first viewpoint; although the argument put forward by MacLean and others gained significant traction in 2017, many have called to attention significant problems with this perspective. See Henry Farrell and Steven Teles, “Even the Intellectual Left Is Drawn to Conspiracy Theories about the Right. Resist Them,” *Vox*, 14 July 2017.

human self-interest paired with bounded rationality—into their worldview.

Despite this diffusion, military theorists, thinkers, and servicemembers alike neither apply public choice thinking in a heuristic fashion like this book does nor use it in a systematic way to shape their policies, guidelines, or structure. This is despite the fact that the U.S. military is the largest bureaucratic organization in the federal government (and state governments, in the case of the National Guard). The lack of application of this line of thought—even though it has become common elsewhere in the national zeitgeist—is likely due to several different reasons. It is partly due to the information asymmetry inherent in specialized bureaucracies. As the all-volunteer force has become ever more isolated from American society, there are fewer citizens and thus fewer members of the government and “public intellectual” community who have the experience and expertise to effectively criticize or counter specific military arguments.²⁸ Indeed, although there are many experts in academia or within what Christian Brose memorably called the “military-industrial-congressional complex,” there are nonetheless far fewer such experts in academia now than any time since the end of World War II.²⁹ Given the decreasing size of the military during the past several decades, there are also fewer veterans with the expertise and desire to develop or apply new ways of looking at decision making.

Inside the military, there has also been a general lack of interest toward developing an individual-based or microeconomic style decision-making model. Many have neglected to seek new ways of thinking about decision making in part due to a general distaste many servicemembers feel toward applying science to broad military problems. In particular, the use of social science to inform military thought fell out of vogue after the Vietnam War and has yet to recover.³⁰ Although the United States military, in particular, has a long history of applying so-called “scientific principles” to warfare, since

²⁸ Amy Zegart writes convincingly about the milieu in the early 1980s that resulted in the last major defense reform, the Goldwater Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. The number of veterans and citizens with military experience and interest was significantly higher than today, and she suggests that this interest and credibility was absolutely necessary to create an environment where Congress could force the military into this sort of reform. See Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 140–46.

²⁹ Christian Brose, *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare* (New York: Hachette Books, 2020), xvii–xviii.

³⁰ Paul Van Riper, “The Foundation of Strategic Thinking,” *Military Strategy Magazine* 2, no. 3 (Summer 2012); and Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant*.

the end of the Vietnam War there has been a movement to return to considering war and warfare something more akin to an art than a science.³¹ As such, there has been something of a bifurcation of military thinkers; there is a scientific school that focuses on discrete systems, effects, and the science and engineering necessary for understanding and employing capabilities that relate to these disciplines.

Conversely, there are those who fall more into the maneuverist school developed during the 1980s. These thinkers suggested that it is impossible to reduce war and warfare into component parts and instead argued that war is a complex interactive phenomenon that requires one to approach it as an art. They sought to restore, in the words of the famous German Army field manual *Truppenführung*, the idea that “war is an art, a free and creative activity founded on scientific principles.”³² This school currently dominates how the Services claim to understand war, if not in actual practice, as U.S. military doctrine (Joint doctrine and the majority of Service doctrine) has trended toward this way of thinking. The U.S. Marine Corps’ foundational doctrine, *Warfighting*, is perhaps the best example of this approach. It deliberately eschews any specifics and instead provides what it calls *philosophy*: general thoughts and ideas for how the Service ought to think about war and warfare.³³

Although there are merits to both ways of thinking about warfare, the bifurcation has led to an interesting dearth of applications of economic thought to the military sphere. In many ways, economic thought lies at a fault line between social science and hard science, and as the application of economic methods to political or social problems, public choice theory might be considered doubly so.³⁴ Because of this, it appears that economic thought in general and public choice theory’s insights in particular have seldom been applied

³¹ For a discussion of this dynamic within the U.S. Army, see Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Antulio J. Echevarria II, *War’s Logic: Strategic Thought and the American Way of War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316135730>.

³² Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, eds., *On the German Art of War: Truppenführung: German Army Manual for Unit Command in World War II* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 17.

³³ *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997).

³⁴ For a useful discussion of how economics is both social science and hard science, see Thomas Sowell, *Basic Economics: A Common Sense Guide to the Economy*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 1–6.

to specific military problems. Nonetheless, Carl von Clausewitz was probably right when he wrote, “rather than comparing it [war] to art we could more accurately compare it to commerce . . . and it is *still* closer to politics, which in turn may be considered as a kind of commerce on a larger scale.”³⁵

As described earlier in the chapter, a final reason public choice theory has rarely been applied directly to military problems is due to a general reluctance to appear to impugn the motives of military personnel, who are all too often treated as beyond reproach by a public that wishes to appear grateful for voluntary service. However, the fact that members of the U.S. military volunteer for their service has almost nothing to do with the way they comport themselves once the initial act of volunteering is complete. A skewed public environment has often prevented much deep critical examination of activities within the Services because it could lead to accusations of “disrespecting the troops” or similar. Specifically, as applies to this volume, self-interest, status seeking, and many of the other motivations discussed throughout are generally considered to be negative traits by modern U.S. society and have rarely been applied to military personnel in recent years. The key point, however, is that they are neither negatives nor positives—they are constants. People act in their own self-interest most of the time. Servicemembers maximize status and reputation most of the time. We should understand this simply as “the way things are,” and not as impugning the Service or the patriotism of any specific individual or set of individuals.

Nonetheless, because of the negative connotations that come with self-interest, status seeking, and reputation management, many have avoided this sort of discussion. The idea of the volunteer force as a collection of self-sacrificing heroes has been a common theme during the all-volunteer era, and the military has carefully crafted narratives, messages, and public perceptions to ensure that the American public simultaneously supports individual servicemembers yet often knows—or seeks—few of the specifics about it.³⁶ This support to the individual military servicemember, however, is precisely the problem. Public choice theory is all about individuals. It seeks to understand how individual preferences and decisions shape collective actions. In

³⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 149.

³⁶ Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America's Military after Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 38–48; and Christopher J. Coyne and Abigail R. Hall, *How to Run Wars: A Confidential Playbook for the National Security Elite* (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2024), 67–68.

the case of the all-volunteer force, if the individual servicemember's decisions are generally beyond reproach—or at least detailed consideration and analysis—then this element of military decision making will be neglected. This is exactly what has come to pass during the current era of the U.S. all-volunteer military force.³⁷

The Foundation

This book suggests three proposals as part of an individual focused way to understand military decision making. First, it restates one of the most basic and banal statements in microeconomics: people are self-interested and respond to incentives. More importantly, rational actors, which members of the military are (just like most people), make choices based on those incentives. Public choice theory assumes that people are self-interested, and generally make choices to maximize things that they individually interpret as useful or important (consciously or unconsciously).

Second, within the strict vertical hierarchy of the military, the incentive or utility most prioritized is to maximize *status* and *reputation*.³⁸ This is an extremely broad statement. There are any number of ways one might interpret status and reputation. They can both apply at a personal level, an organizational level within the hierarchy (i.e., a specific military unit or units), or even an institutional level like a particular Service. Military servicemembers, more so than most other members of society, prioritize status and reputation throughout the entire spectrum of these categories. Because of several factors surrounding military membership and socialization, status and reputation dynamics are the most critical social dynamics within the military, and thus are driving factors behind a much larger portion of military decision making than others have previously granted.

Finally, these dynamics create—and explain—major difficulties within

³⁷ The author recognizes that this was not the case for the entirety of the all-volunteer force. Indeed, the early to mid-1980s were a time of particularly aggressive—and mostly warranted—attacks on the military and the Department of Defense. This culminated in the military reform movement and the Goldwater Nichols Department of Defense Reform Act of 1986. Most other major reform efforts since that time have not succeeded.

³⁸ As students of these topics will recognize, they are not considered the same thing by most modern social scientists. The author will discuss the differences and debates regarding these topics in a later chapter; for the moment, it will suffice to claim that individuals in the military seek to maximize both as best they can, although much like Anthony Downs's earlier interpretation in *Inside Bureaucracy* (New York: Little, Brown, 1967), different actors may seek to prioritize the two differently.

the military structure when one considers the military hierarchy as a series of principal-agent relationships. Each commander at each level has an objective they seek to achieve. Most analyses or discussions of military decision making assume that the highest level's objective remains universal throughout the hierarchy of a given military system and that each echelon seeks to achieve it to the best of their ability. They will generally acknowledge that many specific tasks may not contribute directly to the highest level's objective but assume that even those seemingly unrelated tasks should all combine to support a larger objective.³⁹ What if this is wrong? What if different echelons of command interpret their tasks through the lens of their own self-interest and utility maximization? What if the reason different echelons of command execute their tasks is not because they have some particular fealty to a grand military objective, but instead because they see a particular action or task as the best way to maximize something that matters greatly to them as individuals, their own personal status or reputation? This is exactly how military decision-making should be seen: as multiple interlocking principal-agent relationships in which each actor is self-interested and seeking to maximize a particular utility function: status and reputation. In some cases, this manifests in ways readers will immediately see as the caricature they probably associate with purely selfish bureaucrats, but it generally manifests in far more subtle ways. In later chapters, we will see much of the science behind this phenomenon as well as examples of it in practice.

It is critical to recognize that self-interested does not necessarily mean selfish or self-absorbed, although the terms are often used interchangeably. Neither does it suggest that there is no such thing as altruism or "good deeds." It is entirely possible to be a rational utility-maximizing individual and also seek to help other people. Indeed, in some cases, helping other people or organizations without hoping for remuneration or other reward might be the *best* way a self-interested utility maximizer could accrue status or reputation. This theory does not in any way suggest that every action within the military hierarchy is zero sum; it also does not imply that individuals are consciously calculating every interaction with an eye toward relative status gains. It simply suggests that humans, and military personnel in particular, are uniquely disposed towards maximizing their status and reputation—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, and often a bit of both.

³⁹ Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 9–11.

The Basic Assumptions

There are many different models and ideas that try to describe military decision making. Unlike the effort in this book, which seeks only to explain, most of these are normative models, advocating for a specific method as the most effective. Furthermore, the vast majority uses rational choice decision making as its basic framework, often without even realizing it or at least without specifically noting that this is the underlying framework. The military decision-making literature almost always focuses on unit commanders and the decisions they make for their unit. Some studies focus more on the size of the unit, placing the important decisions entirely at the higher echelons of command, while generally discounting smaller units—and by extension assuming perfect agreement about the decisions and motivation of lower echelons—while others suggest that decision-making theories developed from experience in individual combat can “scale up” to apply at the large unit, institution, or even national level.⁴⁰

Two underlying assumptions are common to essentially all of them, however. First is the assumption that the military hierarchy should be understood as something analogous to the human body’s nervous system, and command structures can be best conceptualized as akin to the brain. This assumption scales up the idea of rational choice decision making, treating organizations as unitary actors.⁴¹ Some might find this analogy to be something of a strawman

⁴⁰ For a theory that generally discounts the tactical level, see Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*. For a theory that scales up from the individual to the unit, institution, or national level, see Frans P. B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (Cheltenham, UK: Routledge, 2006).

⁴¹ Anthropomorphizing hierarchies, organizations, or other entities is by no means unique to a military context; indeed, it is extremely common in related fields like security studies and international relations. For the military, this is perhaps most directly articulated by Col J. F. C. Fuller, although it is a basic assumption that holds true for much subsequent military writing regarding command structures. Martin van Creveld addresses the problems with this analogy directly in the conclusion of *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). See Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 1993). Recent scholarship claims that analogy is the essential core of all human cognition. See Douglas R. Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander, *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 2013). While recognizing it is difficult (or perhaps impossible) for people to conceptualize decision-making systems or organizations without analogizing, the author nonetheless claims that the “brain-body” analogy is a particularly pernicious one. For an excellent discussion of other analogizing using “modern” science throughout the history of warfare, see Antoine J. Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity*, 2d ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022).

to argue against, yet it is nonetheless ubiquitous throughout the different military decision theories. Indeed, John R. Boyd, one of the theorists discussed in this volume, cited the analogy explicitly, as has Joint U.S. Navy and Marine Corps doctrine.⁴² It is common in early century and late century airpower theories alike, and the intellectual lineage of the so-called “maneuverists” rests directly on J. F. C. Fuller’s *Foundations of the Science of War*, which also makes the brain-body claim directly.⁴³

Second is the idea that all (or at least all purposeful) military action occurs in response to some rational, unified, organizational decision, with an ultimate goal in mind, and it is only the specifics—how one might get there—that differ. As two decision theorists wrote in the early 1980s, “most theories of organizational decision making are theories of willful choice. They presume that choices are made intentionally in the name of individual or collective purpose and on the basis of expectations about future consequences of current actions.” They continue, “many of the empirical observations [of decision making in organizations], however, have proven to be inconsistent with a relatively pure theory of rational choice.”⁴⁴ This statement—that empirical observation does not support the idea of organizational intentional choice—has continued to be proven correct in the years since, but military thinkers generally persist in using organizational rational choice as their preferred model.

The two aforementioned assumptions—the anthropomorphic brain-body military organization and purposive and deliberate organizational choice—are flawed, however, and pairing them together produces a distorted image, as if looking at military decision making through warped glass. Or-

⁴² John R. Boyd, “Patterns of Conflict” (presentation, December 1986), slide 99; and *Naval Command and Control*, Naval Doctrine Publication 6 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Navy, 1995).

⁴³ For early century airpower, see David S. Fadok, “John Boyd and John Warden: Airpower’s Quest for Strategic Paralysis,” in *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, ed. Phillip S. Meilinger (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1997), 362–64. For late century airpower, see Mark E. Blomme, “On Theory: War and Warfare Reconsidered,” *Army War College Review* 1, no. 1 (February 2015): 24–41. Also see Heather Venable, “Paralysis in Peer Conflict?: The Material Versus the Mental in 100 Years of Military Thinking,” *War on the Rocks*, 1 December 2020.

⁴⁴ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “Garbage Can Models of Decision Making in Organizations,” in James G. March, *Ambiguity and Command: Organizational Perspectives on Military Decision Making*, ed. James G. March and Roger Wessinger-Baylon (Marshfield, MA: Pittman Publishing, 1986), 13–15.

ganizational decision making in the military, like all other large, complex organizations, is not the product of top-down rational choice but is instead a complex web of negotiations, preferences, and compromises at every echelon of the hierarchy.⁴⁵ The public choice perspective, guided by the science described in subsequent chapters, can provide much insight in this regard.⁴⁶

Public choice theory suggests that much, if not all, military action is subject to the preferences and decisions of individuals throughout the hierarchy of the military: from the very top, all the way down to the lowest levels. Instead of military action occurring via top-down direction, as nearly every description generally just assumes to be true, it is far more organic. Leo Tolstoy perhaps best captures this way of thinking in his legendary novel *War and Peace*; describing Napoléon at the Battle of Borodino (1812) he writes, “Napoléon issued a stream of instructions which had either been carried out already, or were not carried out at all, and never could have been.”⁴⁷ Instead of centralized, top-down direction, Tolstoy suggests that actions in battles are a series of individual reactions to specific circumstances; each person makes their own choices and acts in accordance with their own unique situation. He suggests that top-down, centralized control is an illusion, although for many

⁴⁵ Even what many rightly consider the most monstrous, top-down decision in history, that of the so-called “Final Solution” perpetrated by the Nazi regime in World War II was subject to these dynamics. For in-depth discussion of the political economy of the decision making surrounding the Holocaust, see Franklin G. Mixon, *A Terrible Efficiency: Entrepreneurial Bureaucrats and the Nazi Holocaust* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot Cham, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25767-5>.

⁴⁶ There is much ongoing overlap and debate about the varied interpretations of “rational choice” and how different models intersect in the schools of thought surrounding it. See Roger D. Congleton, “Behavioral Economics and the Virginia School of Political Economy: Overlaps and Complementarities,” *Public Choice* 191, nos. 3–4 (2022): 387–404, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-019-00679-3>.

⁴⁷ Although *War and Peace* is fiction, it has been recognized by many military thinkers as far more than just a fictional work. For a discussion of Tolstoy’s applicability in historical studies and studies of war and warfare, see Rick McPeak and Donna Tussing Orwin, eds., *Tolstoy on War: Narrative Art and Historical Truth in “War and Peace”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801465895>; and John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018). For a discussion of the use of fiction in military history, see Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), xvi. For a discussion of the use of fiction to support military understanding of modern problems, see August Cole and Jacqueline E. Whitt, “‘FICINT’: Envisioning Future War through Fiction & Intelligence,” podcast, War Room, U.S. Army War College, 22 May 2019.

of us it is an immensely comforting one.⁴⁸ This is not to claim that there is no useful direction coming from centralized military authorities, but instead that many military decision-making models ignore the fact that there is far greater feedback from below, lines of authority that go in both directions, and individual decisions that are made in response to many different external stimuli.⁴⁹ Army General George S. Patton agreed, writing that battles were “simply an agglomeration of numerous small actions and practically never develop according to pre-conceived notions.”⁵⁰ This is contrary to the common understanding of military hierarchy and post-hoc descriptions of battles and other military actions; many of these descriptions might suffer because accounts of military decisions are written by, and based on the privileged perspectives of, higher echelon leadership. This has structured the historical model of military decision making as one where the important actions and decisions were made at the top and the everything else was purely mechanistic execution. What if this is wrong?

Regarding the second assumption, it is both familiar and comforting to assume that military decisions are made by a single leader, or even single unified staff, in higher headquarters for the purposes of achieving the “optimal” objective.⁵¹ As James March and Johan Olsen have argued, “simple choice models permeate contemporary theories of individual and collective behavior. The durability of the model is also understandable. Choice is a faith as well as a theory; it is linked to ideologies of the Enlightenment and associated with definitions of the nature of the species.”⁵² To be blunt, a model that assumes humans make decisions using rational choice is often wrong, unless we are to be extremely creative with our understanding of how “optimal” choices are made.⁵³ A model that assumes a single individual who has perfect (or even mostly perfect) information weighs costs and benefits to the organizational interest and then produces some “best” course of action is also wrong.

⁴⁸ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 887–89.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of decision-making authority working in both directions of a hierarchy, see Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-making Processes in Administrative Organizations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997), 9–11.

⁵⁰ Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers, 1940–1945* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1974), 436.

⁵¹ A recent book has called this the “golden thread of purpose.” Jim Storr, *Something Rotten: Land Command in the 21st Century* (Havant, UK: Howgate Publishing, 2022).

⁵² March and Olsen, “Garbage Can Models of Decision Making in Organizations,” 13.

⁵³ For a discussion of the “limitations of rational choice,” see Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 575–606.

Public choice theory instead suggests that everyone in the military chain of command—to include the most senior leaders who are directing actions in peace and war—make decisions with self-interest in mind. The modern research described in subsequent chapters makes it clear that status and reputation dynamics are, at a minimum, one of the most important components of decisions that all humans make, and there is reason to believe it is the most likely reason for military decisions in general because individuals in military service maximize for these things. Most military decision-making models begin with the idea that decisions regarding strategy, operational art, or even immediate tactics are made in response to a particular circumstance; they are rationally chosen to best achieve the objective of defeating the enemy, protecting the force, or planning for future war. There is ample evidence to show that this claim is not true.⁵⁴ As statistician George Box said, “all models are wrong, but some are useful;” in the context of military decision-making theory, there are many models that provide utility, but public choice theory tells us that we should also look at them with a skeptical eye.

Finally, it is important to note that many—almost all—military decision-making models assume away any exigent factors on decisionmakers outside of the purely military sphere. Unlike some of the other models mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, they generally assume the most pressing problem on a leader or actor’s mind is the military problem at hand and disregard the behavioral, structural, or contextual issues that shape each decisionmaker’s actions. In effect, they view the military problem as a closed system. In many cases, particularly historical ones where connection with life outside the conflict was nearly impossible, that might have been somewhat true, but in many other cases it is not.⁵⁵ As one historian described, “in the ‘real world’ relations with Allies, interservice rivalry, careerism, personalities, and similar factors shape structure and behavior, and contaminate ideal models.”⁵⁶ Just as the generals of World War I were surely concerned about the

⁵⁴ Zegart, *Flawed by Design*; and Edward N. Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War* (New York: Touchstone, 1986).

⁵⁵ Even basic circumstances, like the amount of sleep a decision maker got the previous night, might have significant effects on the decisions made. Edward F. Pace-Schott et al., “Sleep-Dependent Modulation of Affectively Guided Decision-Making: Sleep and Decision-Making,” *Journal of Sleep Research* 21, no. 1 (February 2012): 30–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2869.2011.00921.x>.

⁵⁶ Roger Beaumont, “Command Method: A Gap in Military Historiography,” *Naval War College Review* 32, no. 1 (1979).

well-being of their children in the ranks, Admiral William F. Halsey would have been thinking about his mentally ill wife, Fannie; or Douglas MacArthur might have been considering his presidential aspirations, factors outside immediate military decision-making are certain to have considerable effect on decisions that nearly every other individual in service makes.⁵⁷

Even in the moments where leaders were almost entirely separated from the direction of their national or senior leadership, such as Lord Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar, they might have been nonetheless focused beyond the basic contours of solving just the military problem. Indeed, as Nelson wrote before the famous battle, “If it be a Sin to Covet glory, I am the most offending Soul alive so said Shakespeare and so says your Lordships Most faithful Servant.”⁵⁸ Equally, an actor’s individual psychology, including their previous experiences, education, and belief structure, is often disregarded and yet hugely important in shaping the decisions they make.⁵⁹ Consider the case of British Rear Admiral Sir John Arbuthnot, who, as a minor player at the Battle of Jutland (1916) seeking to recover his previously tarnished reputation, caused havoc in Admiral John R. Jellicoe’s deployment of the British Grand Fleet at the cost of his and his ship’s continued existence.⁶⁰ There are also many examples of this sort of problem from recent wars, including the ubiquitous “Dear John” letter and other more difficult issues.⁶¹ Even the simplest of these problems, a basic “lack of time to reflect,” is likely to contribute to less than optimal decisions.

⁵⁷ The losses of children among general officers in World War I were staggering. Many histories simply comment on this fact and move on, although some, like Nick Lloyd, *The Western Front*, consider the human ramifications of this problem. Eric Ludendorff is the prototypical example of an individual who was drastically affected by the loss of a child (stepchild) in the ranks. See Nick Lloyd, *The Western Front: A History of the Great War, 1914–1918* (New York: Liveright, 2021), 408. For more on Adm Halsey, see Evan Thomas, *Sea of Thunder: Four Commanders and the Last Great Naval Campaign 1941–1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 64–66. For more on Gen MacArthur, see Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 17.

⁵⁸ Colin White, ed., *Nelson: The New Letters* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press with National Maritime Museum and Royal Naval Museum, 2005), 376.

⁵⁹ Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 15–40.

⁶⁰ Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea* (New York: Random House, 2003), 955–57.

⁶¹ The author has seen a high-ranking member of a unit return home early from a combat deployment due to concern that they would be unable to perform effectively because of issues occurring in their personal life. Anecdotally, this was a common occurrence during the Global War on Terrorism in combat and support units alike.

Former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis called this “the single biggest deficiency in senior decisionmakers.”⁶² It would be shortsighted to assume this did not affect their ability to consume and understand information and then rationally decide. The reality is almost certainly the opposite. In each of these descriptions of exogenous factors on individuals, we should expect that they would doubly affect actors’ decisions if they are likely to also affect their personal status or reputation.

One of the most interesting and possibly prescient examinations of this type of problem is fictional, although it clearly shows the difficult contours of the issue in a world where connection with families and friends away from the war zone takes no time at all. In a 2018 Center for Strategic and International Studies report, Mark Cancian briefly considers what might happen in a conflict that begins with asymmetric cyberattacks and information warfare, not on military capabilities or even national infrastructure, but on the families of individual servicemembers and the reputations of key leaders.⁶³ This is a problem that looms large over modern all-volunteer military forces; it is also one that remains largely beyond military decision-making models. Phrased bluntly, however, it is pertinent to ask if military leaders would be capable of making “rational choice” decisions while their personal relationships were falling apart and their families could not purchase food, for example. The public choice interpretation of decision-makers would argue that in all cases, servicemembers would focus on the issue they see as most important to them—families, relationships, status, and reputation would likely rise to become the most prominent issues for a nontrivial number of actors. That is not to suggest here that every leader or member of the military would leave their duties in favor of taking care of their family (or even most of them), but even if they did not, purely

⁶² Jim Mattis and Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2019), 199.

⁶³ Mark F. Cancian, *Avoiding-Coping with Surprise in Great Power Conflicts* (Lanham, MD: Center for Strategic and International Studies and Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 109–11. Although the vignettes in this report are obviously fictional, there is at least some indication that militaries around the globe have considered different methods and ideas that resemble these. For example, see Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, trans. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).

rational military decision-making would be a fantasy in this sort of scenario.⁶⁴

One final point to note here is that there is a huge spectrum of decisions within the military structure. The models we will discuss below do not normally draw major distinctions between detailed plans, immediate battlefield engagements, internal bureaucratic battles over funding, well-crafted strategy, or decisions based on recognition alone.⁶⁵ They also do not typically differentiate between decisions that are made using the full input of staffs and subordinates or individual decisions with little contribution from subordinates or supporting actors. The following paragraphs will not expend significant effort disambiguating the multitude of different military decisions; however, there are some key points to be made. Decisions that involve long time horizons and multiple inputs from the bottom of the hierarchy up are likely to have more opportunity for self-interested actors throughout the entire organization to attempt to shape policy and strategy on their own behalf. Conversely, immediate decisions made due to battlefield exigencies are unlikely to allow significant input from others. However, it is reasonable to suspect that these decisions, made without a great deal of conscious reflection, have the potential to be the *most* individually self-interested, due to the limited ability of the brain to reflect and seek other options. The author is unaware of direct evidence to support this idea, but it seems plausible based on the evidence that will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4. We will see examples of all types of military decision in chapters 6 through 8; for now, it is sufficient to state that regardless of how the decision is structured, assuming the actor or actors who contributed to it were acting in their own self-interest to maximize their own or their organization's status and reputation will often provide more ex-

⁶⁴ Although the vignette above is fictional, this is a very real problem for those who consider modern "defense of the homeland." See H. Quinton Lucie, "How FEMA Could Lose America's Next Great War," *Homeland Security Affairs* 15 (May 2019). This was also a very real planning problem during the Cold War as planners contemplated options for saving government and military leadership from nuclear annihilation, often at the expense of their families. See Garrett M. Graff, *Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government's Secret Plan to Save Itself—While the Rest of Us Die* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

⁶⁵ For one attempt to discuss different types of decision making in military-like environments, see Daniel Kahneman and Gary Klein, "Conditions for Intuitive Expertise: A Failure to Disagree," *American Psychologist* 64, no. 6 (2009): 515–26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016755>. For a review of existing articles that try to distinguish among the different types of military decision-making processes, see Ivan D'Alessio et al., "'What about Military Decision-Making?': A Bibliometric Review of Published Articles," *Behavioral Sciences* 14, no. 7 (July 2024): 514, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14070514>.

planatory power than the military decision making models found in the next part of this chapter.

Military Decision-Making Models

Roger Beaumont wrote in 1979 that “the image of an overweening personal power is the basis of most popular perceptions of war. . . . Only occasionally does one glimpse how ground, air, and sea actions . . . were actually being controlled by relatively junior officers in intermittent and confused communication with their ‘leaders,’ usually reporting after the fact.” He further describes how “if nothing else, such an image of individual control and responsibility may be attractive to those caught in the foils of an organizational society.”⁶⁶ Western militaries are nothing if not organizational societies. They greatly prefer to maintain the fiction of top-down decision-making, driven by important decision makers. Although the models we will discuss in the following section take different perspectives on this, the fundamental idea remains: important command decisions made by important decision makers.

Perhaps the most common (or at least one of the most cited) modern debate about military command is one most effectively articulated by Martin van Creveld in *Command in War*. Generally framed as a historical study of command structures, this book essentially captures the debate between centralized decision making and decentralization that came to a head in Western militaries in the early 1980s, and particularly within the group of military reformers who called themselves the “maneuverists.”⁶⁷ Without focusing on exact decision-making processes or theories, it instead uses historical analysis to describe the way different armies have exercised command and control over time, and generally makes a case that the Germans of World War II were the “masters of mobile warfare,” which as mentioned in an earlier paragraph has become something of a shibboleth for Western militaries (generally phrased

⁶⁶ Beaumont, “Command Method.”

⁶⁷ This debate has obviously gone on well outside the military sphere for several centuries and is probably a debate that has existed in some fashion for as long as human societies have existed. For a Nobel laureate economist’s approach to this debate, see F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Ronald Hamowy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). For a discussion of dynamics of centralization and decentralization from an organization design perspective, see Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (London: Portfolio, 2008).

as maneuver warfare, manoeuvre, or something similar).⁶⁸ Van Creveld shows that decentralized command networks tend to be more effective if the context for their employment is right; this is essentially the framework that has come to be accepted by nearly all Western militaries as the correct way to make decisions in military hierarchies, although the efficacy of Western militaries in applying this thinking is hotly debated.⁶⁹

Van Creveld intentionally avoids discussing the “nonmilitary” (social, cultural, and other factors) that affect the context of military decisions and how they come to pass, explicitly stating “command cannot be understood in isolation.”⁷⁰ These very factors are the ones that the current volume sees as most important; indeed, they are the driving factors behind the majority of decision making within the military bureaucracy. In a sense, the “decentralization-centralization” argument that is both common and loved by military thinkers is a red herring that distracts from a more important discussion.⁷¹ First, it perpetuates brain-body thinking and organizational rational choice ideas described throughout this chapter; although decentralization might seem to obviate these (and complete decentralization to the individual level definitely would), in application Western militaries have not even tried to achieve this. Second, military organizations will trend toward one of these poles (centralization versus decentralization) precisely because of nonmilitary factors and circumstances beyond the military decision-making apparatus, a point that van Creveld makes clear in the conclusion of the book. This vol-

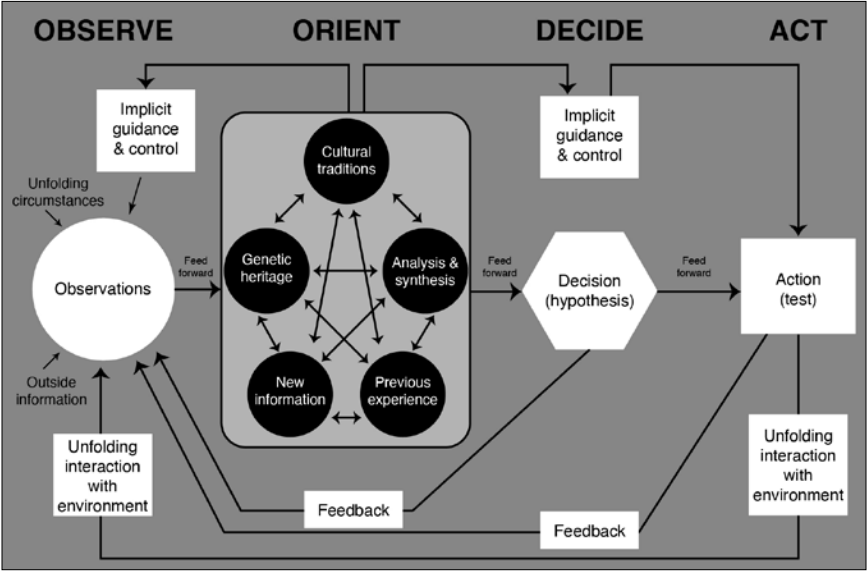
⁶⁸ Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 189; and Peter Roberts and Amos C. Fox, “Is Manoeuvre a Myth?,” podcast, *This Means War*, accessed 8 October 2023. Note: the spelling *manoeuvre* is in common usage in the British and other European militaries. Although definitionally similar, the British spelling is intentionally used here to highlight the slightly different terminology used by other Western militaries.

⁶⁹ Peter Roberts and Anthony King, “Manoeuvre Theory Is in a Coma,” podcast, *This Means War*, accessed 8 October 2023; and Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁷⁰ van Creveld, *Command in War*, 260–64.

⁷¹ In addition to van Creveld, for a few of the many debates and discussions of this topic, see Donald Vandergriff et al., *Mission Command: The Who, What, Where, When and Why—An Anthology*, ed. Donald Vandergriff and Stephen Webber (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2017); Richard D. Hooker, *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993); Storr, *Something Rotten*; Jim Storr, *The Human Face of War* (London: Continuum, 2011); Shamir, *Transforming Command*; and Jörg Muth, *Command Culture: Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901–1940, and the Consequences for World War II* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2013).

Figure 1. John Boyd's OODA loop



Source: Ian T. Brown, *A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2018).

ume posits that the most important of these is the self-interested nature of all actors within the chain of command and their desire for, and subsequent actions in response to, maximizing social status and reputation.

A second decision-making model that *does* seek to take nonmilitary factors into account to some degree is John R. Boyd's observe-orient-decide-act framework, commonly known as the OODA loop.⁷² Boyd explicitly leaned on van Creveld's *Command in War* and a number of other esoteric ideas to build a unique and idiosyncratic theory of command and control.⁷³ There are many issues with his framework, foremost among them that Boyd wrote almost none of his ideas down. Indeed, what he left for posterity was generally in the form of notes, slide decks, and the few videotaped versions of his

⁷² Many will debate whether the OODA loop is a useful decision model. From the author's perspective, it is descriptive—it articulates a process that seems to happen during decision making—but it does not have a great deal of utility as a prescriptive or normative theory. It is included here primarily because of its ubiquity and popularity.

⁷³ Frans P. B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (Cheltenham, UK: Routledge, 2006), 198–202.

famous “A Discourse on Winning and Losing” and “Patterns of Conflict” presentations (many of the videos resurfaced for public use during the second decade of the twenty-first century).⁷⁴ Since his death, these have been filtered, interpreted, and expounded upon by his self-proclaimed “disciples” and others who were interested in his thinking. Despite the *tabula rasa* that Boyd’s thinking has become, his decision-making model does attempt to integrate some of the factors and the more bottom-up understanding Tolstoy and Patton described. Boyd did not seek to describe the sort of multiplayer decision-making problem this book discusses, however; instead, he developed a theory of implicit communication within military systems combined with a cybernetic model of how individuals make decisions and subsequently scaled it up to fit increasingly larger units. As a model of military decision-making, it is generally unobjectionable; although without significant interpretation and translation, it provides little in the way of concrete guidance and probably does not provide the mystical recipe for success that its proponents often suggest.⁷⁵

What Boyd’s theory does not clearly do is explicitly seek to understand how and why many different individuals, with many different interests—often conflicting—make decisions within hierarchies.⁷⁶ Despite his interest in systems thinking and how systems interact, this decision-making model nonetheless retains an implication of the brain-body analogy described above; indeed, Boyd explicitly cited this analogy in his “Patterns of Conflict” brief. Boyd’s framework is more granular than some other models and seeks to consider nonmilitary factors in the orientation phase of the OODA loop but remains focused on the military leader as a key decision-maker, exercising *command* and *control*, though Boyd did not like these terms and sought to

⁷⁴ For one version of John Boyd’s “Patterns of Conflict,” see “John Boyd Patterns of Conflict Part 1,” YouTube, 27:31, 2015. Some of Boyd’s work is also available in Ian T. Brown, *A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.56686/9780997317497>.

⁷⁵ For example, see: “The OODA Loop Explained: The Real Story about the Ultimate Model for Decision-Making in Competitive Environments,” OODALoop.com, accessed 29 July 2024; and Dan Grazier, “Why the OODA Loop Is Forever,” *Task & Purpose*, 13 September 2018.

⁷⁶ This is not to make a claim that Boyd did not think of this, only that it is not clearly present in modern interpretations of the OODA loop and how his ideas are generally used in modern military decision-making contexts.

redefine and rename them in his presentation.⁷⁷ Although he would likely dispute this characterization, the model he built resembles in many ways a decision-making model known as “management control theory,” which is based on the idea of using cybernetic feedback mechanisms to ensure individuals within organizations perform and execute as expected.⁷⁸ There are many complications inherent in this model, however, most of which involve the constant difficulty of reconciling individual preferences and decisions with organizational behavior—the same micro and macro perspective problem described at the beginning of the chapter.

Others have sought to use organizational and managerial studies to inform models for military decision making. A recent example of this sort of application is Ryan Grauer’s *Commanding Military Power: Organizing for Victory and Defeat on the Battlefield*.⁷⁹ In this book, Grauer explicitly integrates modern organization theory and an associated branch known as “contingency theory” with military organizational design. It generally retains the brain-body thinking of other command models, but to a point it disagrees with van Creveld (and Boyd, by extension) by claiming that organizational design and hence decision-making authority should be contingent on the specif-

⁷⁷ Boyd left a single written document, a paper titled “Destruction and Creation,” which many students consider the foundation for his later work. Boyd’s ideas were both richer and on occasion less interpretable than the OODA loop diagram might suggest and definitely richer than the basic OODA loop diagram seen most commonly as a circle with OODA drawn around it. Most importantly for our purposes, despite stating (and sometimes discussing) otherwise, Boyd’s theory remained a top-down command and control theory. He certainly espoused decentralized command structures as van Creveld described; one of his most cited examples was the German *Wehrmacht* in the invasion of France in 1940. This example has obviously been the subject of much debate, but specific to this discussion one might argue that the defeat of France was a defeat of French *leadership*, not a defeat of French *armies*. It was certainly not a defeat of self-interested French *individuals*. Indeed, the French Resistance and Free French show that different individuals chose not to obey the orders of the French high command when the decision to sue for an armistice was reached. For more discussion of Boyd and his thinking, see Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War*. Specifically regarding command and control, see Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War*, 200. For electronic versions of his work, see “John Boyd Homepage,” ColonelBoyd.com, accessed 12 November 2024.

⁷⁸ David Zweig, Jane Webster, and Kristyn A. Scott, “Making the Decision to Monitor in the Workplace: Cybernetic Models and the Illusion of Control,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Decision Making*, ed. Gerard P. Hodgkinson and William H. Starbuck (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199290468.003.0006>.

⁷⁹ Ryan Grauer, *Commanding Military Power: Organizing for Victory and Defeat on the Battlefield* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316670170>.

ic problems and circumstances a military finds itself confronting.⁸⁰ Indeed, Grauer explicitly seeks to refute van Creveld's conclusion regarding decentralized command, stating that "contingency theory's logic suggests this answer [decentralized command] is at best incomplete, and possibly dangerous . . . the recommendation to decentralize must be qualified . . . it is thus not enough simply to say that decentralization is likely to reduce uncertainty and facilitate the effective employment of forces."⁸¹

This is generally unobjectionable, although it makes a mistake similar to one Amy Zegart notices in a different context, where it assumes organizational design is a product of both deliberate efforts to find the "optimal" organizational design and also a *desire for* the "best" organizational design. Zegart claims the opposite is true, writing that "national security agencies are not designed to serve the national interest. New agencies are literally created by actors who are out for themselves, who put their own interests above national ones."⁸² Public choice thinking would agree that a search for and agreement on the best option is extremely unlikely, as many within the bureaucracy should be expected instead to maximize their own self-interest and make decisions based on factors that either do not matter or even work at cross purposes with the ideal organizational design and decision-making structure. Even if they did not, however, differing interpretations of the exact meaning and parameters of the term *best design* suggest that it would be nearly impossible to reach a consensus on how to optimize any military organization even if planned and directed from the very top—perhaps *especially* if planned and directed from the very top.⁸³

A much earlier example of a work that used organizational theory to attempt to explain the military's decision-making apparatus is the previously mentioned *Essence of Decision*. First published in 1971 and later extensively revised and republished, in it, Graham T. Allison recognized that the model of "rational decision making" at the top of government was insufficient to explain how decisions are made ("Model 1" in the book). He developed two other ways of understanding the Cuban Missile Crisis, what he called the

⁸⁰ It disagrees in that van Creveld and Boyd generally suggest that decentralized command structures should be more effective for most military tasks. It agrees, however, on the role of uncertainty and information management by military command structures.

⁸¹ Grauer, *Commanding Military Power*, 39–42.

⁸² Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 52.

⁸³ For one of the most famous Nobel laureate's descriptions and treatments of this problem, see Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*.

“Organizational Process Model,” and the “Governmental (Bureaucratic) Politics Model” (Models 2 and 3).⁸⁴ He showed how we might better understand a given event by employing these models; some decisions or recommendations often seem generally inexplicable when the only model available is rational decision making. This applies directly to the current effort; indeed, to some degree, Allison blazed the trail for this volume (among many others) by analyzing governmental decision making through these lenses. However, his treatment did not fully explore how and why organizational process resulted in many of the actions that it did.

In a sense, this book uses a mix of Allison’s model 2 and model 3 as a starting point, but seeks to look deeper into the decisions made within the military bureaucracy. It works to understand exactly the deeper interaction that takes place to result in them. Phrased differently, Allison did not go far enough. His models, despite integrating internal processes and politics among different actors, nonetheless retain the idea that leadership (at some level) is making explicit decisions with particular outcomes (other than individual, self-interested ones) in mind. Organizational outputs do indeed shape decisions made at higher echelons of the hierarchy, but the role of standard operating procedures (SOPs) is likely far smaller than Allison’s model 2 argues. Indeed, many studies of bureaucracies have shown that SOPs not only allow for *more* interpretation and individual initiative at the lowest levels, but in many ways, they force it.⁸⁵ The decisions that low-level actors make in this regard then feed back into the system as a whole and shape, constrain, and greatly affect actions taken at the highest levels. Most models, including Allison’s, give short shrift to the agency and influence (conscious or not) that the members of a bureaucratic hierarchy have on direction and implementation of organizational objectives and direction.

Other famous theories of decision making from fields such as organiza-

⁸⁴ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971), 4–7.

⁸⁵ Steven Maynard-Moody and Shannon Portillo, “Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, ed. Robert F. Durant, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 252–77, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238958.001.0001>. For more in-depth treatment of this unique and foundational theory, see Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983). For additional discussion of how bureaucracies and bureaucrats interpret and manipulate established rules (including SOPs) to align with their preferences, see Rachel Augustine Potter, *Bending the Rules: Procedural Politicking in the Bureaucracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

tion studies, managerial studies, or studies of various types of administration have been generally neglected by those who focus primarily on the military. These include famous works like Cohen, March, and Olsen's "Garbage Can Theory," John Kingdon's use of and addition to this theory to build a groundbreaking model of government policy making, and Charles Lindblom's concept of "muddling through."⁸⁶ Each of these provides an alternative to the rational choice decision making model that underpins both assumptions regarding military decision making described at the beginning of this section; although Lindblom's description does still imply top-down decision making, it argues that the general concept of rational choice using means and ends to reach some "best" objective is essentially impossible. Public choice theory's model of decision making also provides an alternative to the rational choice model, as it argues that there are self-interested, utility maximizing decisions constantly being made up and down the hierarchy that each influence and change the context of organizational decisions *and may be made without the actor clearly understanding how or why they are making them*.

Finally, British sociologist Anthony King recently made an explicit case for "military managerialism," to some degree reframing entirely the idea of command, and thus *who* within the hierarchy is making the rational choices described above. In *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General*, King claims that the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a new regime of command; more specifically, "in order to conduct divisional operations in the twenty first century, divisional commanders can no longer monopolize decision making. They have been forced to distribute their authority . . . and create 'command collectives'."⁸⁷ In short, King believes that military decision making has moved away from the previous model of "great men" or Clausewitzian "geniuses" and is instead now embodied by cohesive, collective teams at the highest echelons of command structures. He does not explore in-depth many of the implications of this "command change;" first,

⁸⁶ Cohen, March, and Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," 1–25. Their work regarding military decision making is addressed in an out-of-print book titled *Ambiguity and Command*. The author does not claim that alternative theories are entirely neglected in military decision-making studies, only that they are usually not used and that the rational choice model these theories provide alternatives for is by far the most well-known and preferred by military thinkers. John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1984); and Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through,'" *Public Administration Review* 19, no. 2 (1959): 79–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/973677>.

⁸⁷ Anthony King, *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108642941>.

that this type of command structure and decision making greatly complicates all other decision making throughout the military hierarchy. Indeed, if there are large consortia of staff officers at each echelon of the hierarchy who are each empowered to direct action, then it will be increasingly difficult to align individual actors with whatever action that a higher echelon or authority has directed to occur. Or more simply (using public choice and principal-agent assumptions outlined earlier), the problem was that commanders tell their subordinates what to do and those subordinates may not do exactly as directed because they act in their own self-interest. In King's model, the problem now becomes one where hundreds of staff officers are all directing subordinate staff officers to do things while simultaneously advocating for their commander to direct specific courses of action. This is a significantly more complex and difficult problem. It is also probably more descriptively accurate, while nonetheless retaining the two major assumptions most military decision making is built on—the brain-body analogy and right decisions (or at least thoughtful, generally optimized decisions) made at the top of a command hierarchy and executed by subordinates. This book generally agrees with the organizational description King provides but hopes to build on it more fully by seeking to apply psychological and physiological motivations to the multitude of actors in a command structure and reframing brain-body thinking and the idea of right decisions.

The basic question each of these models seeks to understand is how and why the best, or at least rational, military decisions are made. Whether intentionally or not, they all take an essentially top-down perspective. One of the most perceptive writers on bureaucracy has said “there are two ways to look at government agencies: from the top down and from the bottom up. Most books, and almost all elected officials, tend to take the first view. The academic perspective . . . typically centers on the structure, purposes, and resources of the organization.”⁸⁸ This book approaches the military bureaucracy and decision-making apparatus differently than almost any existing model. It does not seek to understand best military decisions, because in the framing described here all military decisions are compromises. Decisions are trade-offs and compromises between principles within a single decisionmaker's psyche, they are compromises among members of a given “command collective,” in King's terminology; and once a decision is made, execution is a compromise

⁸⁸ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 11.

between many different echelons of actors within a hierarchy—principals and agents—who each decide how to appropriately act or not within the constraints of a given direction. Indeed, each subordinate actor compromises internally and with their personal collective all the time as well. The complexity of military decision making is far more extensive and difficult to capture than any of the models described above; this book recognizes this complexity and seeks to understand and explain how military decisions are made by building a public choice informed picture of what *actually* happens, not what we believe *ought to* happen or how recorded history, which is limited by rational choice models and who recorded the history, tells us correct decisions have been made previously.

There are always significant gaps between theory and reality; the most effective way to bridge these gaps is not to develop grand theories of how military command structures should be designed and how “great men” should make rational decisions within them.⁸⁹ Instead, military decisions, as all organizational decisions, should be seen as usually made through a complex dance of negotiations, reciprocal shaping of behaviors and thinking, deliberate or subconscious trade-offs, and explicit or implicit calculations about how the decisions will affect exogenous audiences who may not have a direct interest in the decision but may nonetheless use it to shape their opinion of the organization or the actors within it. Just as important is what historian Geoffrey P. Megargee called the “‘illusion of control,’ the idea that a commander and his staff can understand and direct events from hundreds of miles away.” He further describes how the constant taking of reports and outpouring of orders reinforces the illusion Tolstoy so rightly described in the introduction to this chapter. It is, however, just that—an illusion.⁹⁰ The insights of public choice theory make it clear that the critical actor in the military decision-making equation is each individual who lives within the military bureaucracy. The decisions they make—usually informed by self-interest and typically status and reputation maximizing—aggregate to lead to what appears as a particular behavior that most *ex post* observers will attribute to command decisions but

⁸⁹ The phrasing here intentionally uses the term *great men* to refer to the now dated “great man theory” of leadership. For more in depth discussion of trait-based leadership approaches, see Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2019), 19–43.

⁹⁰ Geoffrey P. Megargee, “Triumph of the Null: The War within the German High Command, 1933–1945” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1998), 599.

is better understood as an emergent feature of a system that prioritizes specific properties or utility functions.

The following chapters describe the theories and social science to support this perspective. Following this, part II offers examples of this behavior at each echelon in the military hierarchy. It is necessarily true that those who are higher in the chain of command have a greater effect on more individuals when they make decisions or direct some action solely by dint of the legal responsibility that has been vested in them. The author does not dispute this fact. However, it is equally true that any decision, policy, or direction will be filtered through cascades of self-interested individuals and principal-agent problems. Perhaps the *ex post* assessment of any given decision will show that the right rational choice was taken and, like an army of Frederick the Great's automatons, every individual executed their part like a robot. More likely, however, is that any honest assessment after the fact would describe a mess of different incentives, competing initiatives, and inexplicable actions throughout the chain of command. Public choice thinking, shaped by the idea that servicemembers maximize status and reputation, might explain much of this. It appears even in the hardest fought and high-stakes conflicts of the past hundred years; and it likely will be found in many other places throughout history as well.

Chapter 2

Public Choice Theory

It's so much more fun to prate of man as a noble creature, a semidivine being bursting with goodness and mercy and all kinds of generous thoughts. It—takes our minds off ourselves. . . . Well, he isn't a noble creature, as well we know by now; he's a remarkably clever animal whose talents have outstripped his powers of reason. And his deepest instincts seem to be greed and vanity and self-interest.

~ Anton Myrer¹

In May 2023, a strange spectacle played out around the city of Bakhmut, Ukraine. By this point in the Russia-Ukraine war, Bakhmut had become a flashpoint for both sides. Ukraine devoted enormous resources to preventing its capture, and on the opposing side, Russian forces did the opposite. By mid-May, it appeared that the town had largely been seized by Russian forces, and on 21 May 2023 Russia officially declared victory over Ukrainian forces there, although the fighting continued in and around the city.² There were several very unusual elements to this battle; first, the city had long since lost its strategic utility. The attack originally seemed to be intended to support a large-scale Russian encirclement of Ukrainian forces, but by fall 2022, it was clear that this portion of the strategy was not workable.³ Nonetheless, the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organization led by Russian oligarch and Vladimir Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, pressed on with the offensive. This

¹ Anton Myrer, *Once an Eagle: A Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1968), 302.

² Kateryna Stepanenko, “The Kremlin’s Pyrrhic Victory in Bakhmut: A Retrospective on the Battle for Bakhmut,” Institute for the Study of War, 24 May 2023.

³ Stepanenko, “The Kremlin’s Pyrrhic Victory in Bakhmut.”

leads to the second unusual piece of the fighting around Bakhmut; soldiers from the regular Russian armed forces did not lead the assault during much of the hardest fighting. Instead, the Wagner Group led this effort at enormous cost and with tremendous difficulty. In many cases, the group employed mass formations of Russian criminals who had been offered the opportunity to fight for their freedom as cannon fodder.⁴ Finally, starting in Winter 2023, the leader of this group, the now deceased Yevgeny Prigozhin, began publicly claiming the Russian military leadership took actions that prevented the Wagner Group from taking the town, culminating in a series of accusations of treason on the messaging app Telegram, in video releases, and eventually what amounted to a full-scale mutiny (and threatened attack on Moscow) by the majority of the group.⁵

Why would the Russian military seemingly act to stop one of its own subordinate units from taking a strategic objective? Why would the Wagner Group expend incalculable resources to seize a town that had very little intrinsic strategic or operational value? Why would the Russian military leadership continue to nominally support the battle for this small and strategically unimportant town? How can we explain throwing lives and resources away in this context, where none of the grand narratives seem to make sense? Public choice theory offers a way to understand this and many other seemingly inexplicable or at least hard to understand actions by individuals within government bureaucracies (and often elsewhere). Public choice theory assumes that people are self-interested, that they (and their organizations) are “rent seeking,” and like most decision theories based in economics, that each of these individuals will try to maximize some “utility function.” People in military hierarchies seek to maximize status and reputation more often than not.⁶ In the case of Bakhmut, many analysts have described how prestige, status, and

⁴ “The Price of Bakhmut. We Reveal the Staggering Toll of Russia’s Bloodiest Battle since WW2 and Wagner’s Inmates Recruited to Fight It,” Mediazona, 10 June 2024.

⁵ For videos of Yevgeny Prigozhin making these and similar allegations, see Serg Высоцкий [@SergAlbertich], “Наша священная война превратилась в крысятничество” Ну и как, скажите, после такого можно было выжить?,” A partial English language transcript and description can be found in “‘We’re Saving Russia,’ ” Meduza, 24 June 2023. For additional discussion and examples, see Patrick Reeve, “Wagner Mercenary Chief Calls for Armed Rebellion against Russian Military Leadership,” ABC News, 23 June 2023.

⁶ The author focuses almost entirely on the U.S. military and Western militaries more generally throughout the book. Nonetheless, the Battle of Bakhmut provides a useful initial vignette for discussing how public choice theory might inform thinking about military operations.

reputation are precisely the factors that led to the continuation of the apocalyptic battle as well as a final conflict between the Wagner Group and Russian military leadership that likely eventually resulted in Prigozhin's death.

Returning to the previous questions: Why would the Russian military take action to stop the Wagner Group from taking an important strategic objective? Michael Kofman, one of the most perceptive and prolific analysts of the Russia-Ukraine War, has described how it appears that the many members of the Russian military leadership actually *wanted* Wagner Group to fail in their attack because if Wagner succeeded it would undermine the *prestige* of the Russian Army, who had been unable to take Bakhmut.⁷ At the same time, analysts have described how Wagner and Russian forces needed to continue fighting in Bakhmut due to the loss of prestige that would come if they canceled their offensive. As James Beardsworth wrote in the *Moscow Times*, "One possible reason for Russia pouring so many men and resources into the battle is that it has become a question of military prestige."⁸ Others argued that Bakhmut became a critical objective for Ukrainian forces for exactly the same reason; the *New York Times* described it as "a symbol beyond its strategic importance."⁹ Finally, the Wagner Group framed Bakhmut as a fight for honor, issuing an award to the combatants engraved with: "On October 8, 22, the command of PMC Wagner and General S. V. Surovikin made the decision to start Operation 'Bakhmut Meat Grinder' with the aim of saving the Russian army and Russia's honour."¹⁰ Are these good reasons to risk, and regularly sacrifice, the lives of soldiers on the front line, the lives of civilians nearby, and untold amounts of critical military materiel? Perhaps.

A more effective way to understand these activities in and around Bakhmut, however, is to assume that most individuals involved were self-interested actors, and the actions in and around the city were more representative of an aggregation of actions each one took to maximize their own self-interest and less the grand design of a strategic puppet master that then led to mechanical execution across the battlefield on both sides. The Russian, Wagner Group, and Ukrainian leadership all strove to maximize and pro-

⁷ Michael Kofman and Ryan Evans, "Ukraine's Offensive and Its Meaning for the War," *War on the Rocks*, 30 May 2023.

⁸ James Beardsworth, "Explainer: Why Is Russia Trying So Hard to Capture the Small Ukrainian City of Bakhmut?," *Moscow Times*, 12 December 2022.

⁹ Paul Sonne, "Ukraine Is Still Grappling with the Battlefield Prigozhin Left Behind," *New York Times*, 26 August 2023.

¹⁰ "The Price of Bakhmut."

tect their own status and reputation, while seeking to degrade that of their competitors. Soldiers in the ranks fought for a mix of complex reasons as soldiers always do, but it is reasonable to argue that self-preservation, honor and personal status, unit status, and, in the case of Wagner Group mercenaries a direct incentive (release from prison) all likely played a part. Each of these will be discussed more in subsequent chapters. Public choice theory—a microeconomic understanding of the way humans act in groups—provides a useful way of understanding this battle, as well as the way individuals within militaries act in general.

Public Choice

In the 1950s and early 1960s, a small number of economists, lawyers, and scholars tried to “demonstrate the power of applying the analytical tools of economics to the study of political institutions.”¹¹ Although today many see this approach as both obvious and commonplace, at the time it was far from that. Indeed, one scholar recently wrote “in 1962 it [this approach] was both original and radical.”¹² Since that time, the basic assumptions and approach of public choice and related fields have become increasingly accepted, and despite roiling debates during the 1970s and beyond, the many different fields that might fall under the rubric of public choice theory have flourished.

Public choice theory is an extremely broad concept that encompasses a large number of ideas and subordinate theories. Many of these come from different disciplinary backgrounds or lineages. As the introduction briefly mentioned, the basic ideas of public choice have been known by many different names, including public choice theory, political economy, social choice theory, rational choice theory, the new institutionalism, and others.¹³ The first journal founded to specifically address this way of thinking was originally

¹¹ Dennis C. Mueller, “Gordon Tullock and Public Choice,” *Public Choice* 152, nos. 1/2 (2012): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-011-9857-0>.

¹² Mueller, “Gordon Tullock and Public Choice.”

¹³ Patrick Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice: Economic Approaches in Political Science* (London: Routledge, 1991); Dennis C. Mueller, “Public Choice, Social Choice, and Political Economy,” *Public Choice* 163, nos. 3/4 (2015): 379–87, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-015-0244-0>; and Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

called *Papers on Non-Market Decision Making*.¹⁴ Along with these and many other terms that generally use much the same analytical approach, there is also a large number of related or associated disciplines with similar theoretical underpinnings: organization theory, agency theory, contingency theory, bureaucracy theory, street-level bureaucracy theory, and many others. Within each of these broader theories, there are disciplinary approaches that focus on ever more narrow subsets of the general problems that each theory or model seeks to explain.¹⁵

Public choice thinking is also an early manifestation of the idea of rational choice decision making applied outside of economics. There are countless approaches to organizational and individual decision making; many of these were described in the previous chapter. Importantly for the discussion here, however, is the early public choice idea that one might use economic models to describe, and predict, individual human and organizational behavior. There are many issues that arise when one begins to attribute pure rationality to any human endeavor, and that will not be done here. Indeed, although generally using Nobel laureate Herbert Simon's terminology of *bounded rationality*, this volume applies it to individual decision makers while also recognizing the many structural and environmental effects that constrain and shape their decisions. Although public choice theory has much to offer in this regard, it also appears suspect in some areas. Here it will be applied neither as a predictive model nor as a fully provable theory, but instead as a way of thinking about and understanding individual behavior. As Peter Abell writes, "it [rational choice] can be used, where appropriate, in a formal manner—as it is by many economists—where actors are deemed to equate measurable benefits and costs at the margin, but also in a much less formal manner."¹⁶ In one scholar's framing, the theory is more effectively applied and understood

¹⁴ Founded in 1966, this journal was retitled *Public Choice* in 1968, and it remains an active journal today that "publishes scholarly research that applies economics to nonmarket social phenomena, such as politics, law, religion, conflict, and the family." Also see William C. Mitchell, "Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington: Twenty-Five Years of Public Choice and Political Science," *Public Choice* 56, no. 2 (1988): 101–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00115751>.

¹⁵ Roger D. Congleton, "Behavioral Economics and the Virginia School of Political Economy: Overlaps and Complementarities," *Public Choice* 191, nos. 3–4 (2022): 387–404, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-019-00679-3>.

¹⁶ Peter Abell, "Rational Choice Theory and the Analysis of Organizations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sociology, Social Theory, and Organization Studies: Contemporary Currents*, ed. Paul Adler et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxford-hb/9780199671083.013.0014>.

as a heuristic instead of a positivist social theory; the author here applies it in this way throughout the book.¹⁷

Each of the models associated with public choice or its related disciplines offers a slightly different look at many phenomena that are loosely associated with and generally fall under the broad rubric of the study of individual decision making and how it affects collective action. Gordon Tullock, one of the founders of public choice theory, and his colleagues wrote in 2002 that “public choice is a scientific analysis of government behavior and, in particular, the behavior of individuals with respect to government.”¹⁸ Although this definition is probably sufficient to narrow the scope of public choice theory as it applies to this book, this chapter will nonetheless spend a moment discussing the most significant parts of the theory and which of them most directly apply to the argument made in subsequent pages.

Although Tullock provides a useful definition, even within the field specifically known as public choice theory (as opposed to the others described above) there are several different schools. One review characterized “public choice” as comprising three different schools: the Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington.¹⁹ Each has its own unique focus and specific components. The Rochester school, founded by Political Scientist William H. Riker at Rochester University in New York, developed what was first known as “positive political theory.”²⁰ This version of public choice thinking prioritized formal game theoretic modeling and other statistical analysis and experiments. Often called the “Caltech” school by later public choice thinkers, this school has often been the subject of “swirling debate” among political scientists, economists, and decision theorists, among others.²¹

The Bloomington school represents a unique combination of political

¹⁷ Colin Hay, “Theory, Stylized Heuristic or Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?: The Status of Rational Choice Theory in Public Administration,” *Public Administration* (London) 82, no. 1 (2004): 39–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0033-3298.2004.00382.x>.

¹⁸ Gordon Tullock, Arthur Seldon, and Gordon L. Brady, *Government Failure: A Primer in Public Choice* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2002), 3.

¹⁹ Mitchell, “Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington.”

²⁰ S. M. Amadae and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, “The Rochester School: The Origins of Positive Political Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 269–95, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.269>.

²¹ Amadae and Bueno de Mesquita, “The Rochester School”; and Charles R. Plott, “Public Choice and the Development of Modern Laboratory Experimental Method in Economics and Political Science,” Social Science Working Paper 1383, California Institute of Technology, August 2014, <https://doi.org/10.7907/dtmw-b5164>.

philosophy and formal modeling. Led by the husband-wife team of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom, who was the first woman awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, this school has been credited in large part with sparking the resurgence of political economy as a field.²² Unlike the formal model-focused Rochester school, the Bloomington school approached public choice with a uniquely interdisciplinary, creative, and open-ended sort of scholarship that rejected many divides that were found in academic research at the time (and often still are).²³ Although usually considered a separate school of thought, the Bloomington school shared deep ties and close connections to the last of the public choice schools, the Virginia school.²⁴

The Virginia school is the most well-known of the three, and its foundational primer by Gordon Tullock and James M. Buchanan's 1962 volume *Calculus of Consent*, is considered by many to be the origin text of public choice theory. This school drew inspiration from a broad cross section of economists and was originally developed explicitly in opposition to the economic theories that informed government action in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One review described the Virginia school's primary contributions to public choice theory as "a theory of the failure of political processes," and until the late 1980s and early 1990s was generally little known to or neglected by political scientists and other decision theorists.²⁵ Throughout the years, this school also focused its efforts most directly on people within government systems—bureaucracies, courts, regulation, and government employment among other examples—and thus will be the school that most informs the assumptions and framing of the current volume.

For the purposes of this analysis, the term *public choice theory* is applied in a broad and all-encompassing manner. Almost all the schools, models, or theories mentioned above (and many others) use a similar set of basic assumptions, the majority of which are essentially uncontested. The term *public choice* serves here as a proxy for all these concepts and this volume will gener-

²² "The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences," NobelPrize.org, accessed 12 November 2024.

²³ Jayme S. Lemke and Vlad Tarko, "Introduction: The Bloomington School in Context," in *Elinor Ostrom and the Bloomington School: Building a New Approach to Policy and the Social Sciences*, ed. Jayme S. Lemke and Vlad Tarko (Montréal, Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

²⁴ Duhnea and Martin, "Public Choice Theory."

²⁵ Mitchell, "Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington."

ally not differentiate or seek to adjudicate minor academic disputes between the literature. That said, where there are clear differences or a different theory provides more useful explanatory power, the differences are noted and the text will articulate how that particular theory of organization and collective action applies and why public choice falls short. In general, however, public choice theory serves as shorthand for a broad range of different organizational theories that simultaneously have similar starting points and areas of analysis and yet often approach these areas with slightly different interpretive lenses and focus points. As Amy Zegart has written describing the interaction of different models purporting to explain bureaucratic behavior, although many seem to have similar analyses, “one model’s independent variable is the other’s dependent variable.”²⁶ Understanding that these differences exist, they are noted where useful and otherwise generally treated as different schools of thought under the extremely broad umbrella of public choice theory.²⁷

A note to the reader: public choice theory and the broader field of political economy and related disciplines have generated extensive scholarship since entering the mainstream in the early 1960s. Where possible, the author cites the original thinking that created the field; although modern scholarship has built on the foundation created during the mid-twentieth century, the critical foundations were laid there. As the *urtexts* of public choice theory often articulate the basic points of the discipline more clearly than detailed modern scholarship, they serve as the foundation for this work where and when possible.

What is public choice theory? First, and most importantly, public choice theory assumes that people, who are inherently political actors, are “primarily concerned with their own self-interest.”²⁸ Note that this does not necessarily mean people *always* act in their own self-interest; it also does not necessarily mean they consciously interpret the actions they take as being in their own

²⁶ Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 20.

²⁷ The justification for using public choice as opposed to other disciplines is that public choice has been considered a separate discipline since approximately 1948, and as such is the most established and best known of the different theories seeking to explain collective choice. The eminence of this discipline can be seen in the fact that public choice thinkers have been awarded no fewer than three, and by some counts five or more, Nobel Prizes in economics since the inception of the theory. See Dennis C. Mueller, *Public Choice III* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813771>.

²⁸ Tullock, Seldon, and Brady, *Government Failure*, 4.

self-interest. A corollary to this point is that they also may confabulate reasons: in many cases, the human mind may develop a causal story about its actions that does not actually align with the actions taken. Self-deception is real and ubiquitous everywhere in the human condition. We will return to these points later in the book. Nonetheless, as a general rule public choice theorists and other organizational thinkers sparked something of a revolution with this assumption. Prior to the late 1940s, political science and its associated theory generally saw the goal of politics as producing “morally right policies.”²⁹ After World War II, economists began to think about political action in the same manner as microeconomic theories treated consumers: individuals with unique preferences who should generally be expected to act on them. It was this individual behavior that, in aggregate, made up the economy; public choice thinkers realized that similar reasoning could help explain how humans make political decisions.

This approach was not without problems however.³⁰ Microeconomic theory of the time (and much even today) was developed using a construct or heuristic often referred to as *homo economicus* for considering the behavior of individuals. *Homo economicus* was assumed to be a rational actor with perfect information, who maximized utility to its utmost. For most observers of actual human behavior, this pure rationality did not comport with real life. Herbert Simon’s landmark *Administrative Behavior* began the process of solving this problem. Simon described the way humans make decisions differently than the *homo economicus*, who chooses the most rational decision from a set of all possible options. Instead, he described what he called a process of *bounded rationality*. Although unable to know, understand, or make sense of the infinite set of possible options when making decisions, humans nonetheless seek to maximize utility from a set of options that are cognitively

²⁹ Tullock, Seldon, and Brady, *Government Failure*, 4–5.

³⁰ The most significant problem is what is often called the “aggregation problem,” where macroeconomic behavior might be difficult to explain in aggregate using microeconomic tools. There is much debate about this problem and its component parts; it will not be discussed here other than to acknowledge that the problem exists. In future chapters, the author argues, however, that we can indeed explain military decision-making in exactly this manner. For a further discussion of the problem of “collective rationality,” see Paul Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 49. For a book-length discussion of many of the factors that contribute to this problem, see Oskar Morgenstern, *On the Accuracy of Economic Observations*, 2d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963). For a brief treatment of the problem see Reuven Brenner, “The Trouble with Aggregates,” *Law and Liberty*, 20 January 2025.

available. Thus, they do not maximize utility as *homo economicus*, but instead do their best given the well-known limits of human cognition.³¹

The idea of boundedly rational actors who are self-interested and seek to maximize some utility function—usually the best available option from a bounded set—has thus become both foundational and unobjectionable within the public choice literature and indeed, the vast majority of thought about organizations, hierarchies, and human relations. One pair of scholars recently described how rational choice models are the *sine qua non* of public choice, but neither the Bloomington or Virginia schools “apply these models in a mechanical or uncritical fashion.”³² This way of thinking about human decisions and interactions—rational utility maximizing yet shaped by factors beyond the control of the individual actor or actors—is the foundation for the two most important aspects of public choice theory for this volume: the study of democracy and the study of bureaucracies. There are many other elements that have fallen under the umbrella of public choice, but these two categories are the most essential.

First, public choice theorists study democracy, voting, what organizations and people influence the government, and how it makes decisions. In many ways, this part of the theory, famously first articulated in James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock’s *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*, is beyond the scope of this book.³³ Nonetheless, this text briefly considers several of the concepts that might tangentially apply to later chapters. The first is what American economist Mancur Olson described as “the logic of collective action.” In his genre-defining book of the same name, he articulates what is today known as the collective action problem: “the larger the number of individuals or firms that would benefit from a collective good, the smaller the share of the gains from action in the group interest that will accrue to the individual or firm that undertakes the action.” This suggests that “large groups are less able to act in their common interest than small ones.”³⁴ It also leads to the conclusion that specific individual actions (e.g., voting) are often not worth the benefit the action provides. Modern scholarship in this regard has also examined the idea that collective action

³¹ Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997), 88–89.

³² Duhnea and Martin, “Public Choice Theory,” 19.

³³ James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*, vol. 3 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999).

³⁴ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 431.

itself might be a problem; for example, economist Bryan D. Caplan has written that the problem in democracies is less that voting is not worth the effort for the average voter, but instead that the average voter chooses to use their vote irrationally and thus bad policies are created.³⁵ Collective action problems are a common issue in democracies, just as they have been for much of the history of humankind. Public choice theorists have applied this general construct to voting, environmental policy, general public goods, and a host of other related issues.³⁶

A second major element of public choice theory is a framework for understanding actions self-interested actors take *within* the government and how others might seek to gain and exert some control or influence over their actions. Two of the most prominent parts of public choice theory in this regard are known as *logrolling* and *rent seeking*. In Tullock's words, "logrolling is vote trading."³⁷ There are good and bad reasons for logrolling, and there are good and bad outcomes that might result from it. This book (and most public choice literature) does not make a value judgment on the process of trading votes, it simply notes that this is an excellent example of how self-interested political actors will make trades to get something they want. There are any number of reasons a political actor might logroll, although much political science literature would suggest the primary reason for nearly all activity by elected officials is reelection.³⁸

Rent seeking is the next well-known issue that public choice theory considers in-depth. A well-studied topic, it is nonetheless a confusing term that does not seem to clearly say what it means. In short, rent seeking refers to when an actor expends resources to persuade the government to do something that favors them against their competitors at the (potential) expense of the population writ large. This comes in several often-decried varieties, such as lobbying, many different forms of regulatory capture, special tariffs (i.e.,

³⁵ Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828821>.

³⁶ The essential issue with the collective action problem is that without some clear and obvious incentive *that they would not receive otherwise*, self-interested people are unlikely to participate in and devote resources to a problem. Government programs, voting, environmental regulation, and many other social issues are all classic examples of the collective action problem. For an in-depth discussion of voting, see Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, 79–111.

³⁷ Tullock, Seldon, and Brady, *Government Failure*, 29.

³⁸ R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

to benefit a specific national industry while creating more expensive goods overall), or unique zoning arrangements, among others. Again, this topic is somewhat beyond the scope of this book, other than to serve as another example that proves people should generally be assumed to act in their own self-interest. Does rent seeking apply in a military context? Almost certainly. There are many areas where the military Services might be accused of rent seeking; for example, consider the 1948 Key West Agreement where the U.S. Air Force and Army agreed to specific roles and responsibilities between the Services, thus granting each other monopolies on specific types of military equipment and doctrine and in so doing limiting the possibility of competition between the two Services. Many observers have described how this limits effectiveness at the expense of bureaucratic efficiency; ultimately, it supports the interests of the Services while probably harming the greater national interest (i.e., effective national defense).³⁹

Shadows of rent seeking abound in military operations where organizations appear to have been inexplicably assigned tasks that do not support the overall mission, provide some sort of benefit to the organization tasked but little to the greater strategic outcome, or different Services are included in operations to placate their need to be a part of a given mission regardless of whether that suits the requirements of the specific event. Some examples of these types of military rent seeking might include the previously discussed Wagner Group's operations around Bakhmut, the U.S. Marine Corps' advocacy for a separate area of operations in Helmand Province in Afghanistan in the early 2010s, or the implausible design of the force that sought to rescue American hostages in Iran during the Iranian hostage crisis (1979–81), colloquially known as “Desert One” and formally titled Operation Eagle Claw.⁴⁰ In the pursuit of everyday business, the different U.S. Services seek

³⁹ Jim Storr, *Something Rotten: Land Command in the 21st Century* (Hampshire, UK: Howgate Publishing, 2022); and Harry Truman, “Functions of the Armed Forces and the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” 21 April 1948. This memorandum is mentioned in Department of Defense documents as the Key West Agreement. See Alice C. Cole et al., eds., *The Department of Defense: Documents on Establishment and Organization, 1944–1978* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1978), and Kenneth W. Condit, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, vol. 2, 1947–1949 (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1996)

⁴⁰ For more on the Marine Corps in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 64–67; for an in-depth treatment of Operation Eagle Claw, see Keith Allan Coulter, “Operation Eagle Claw: Explaining a Foreign Policy Failure” (PhD diss., Carleton University, Canada, 1995).

to influence lawmakers directly, maintaining congressional liaison offices that purport to educate and inform but also advocate on their Services' behalf, even if that could be potentially detrimental to the other Services or the public—normative assessment of rent-seeking efforts tends to depend on one's position in relation to the effort.⁴¹

Beyond rent seeking and logrolling, one of the most important elements of public choice theory for the purposes of this book is its extensive study of bureaucracy. Although much of the public choice literature was groundbreaking, the study of bureaucracies in different academic disciplines antedates the school of public choice by nearly a century. Max Weber, one of the fathers of sociology, is broadly recognized to be the progenitor of all studies that examine the internal workings of bureaucracies. He was both thoughtful and incredibly prescient, and any study of hierarchy and bureaucracy should recognize Weber as its intellectual progenitor. He was followed by many sociologists, economists, and organization theorists who studied bureaucracy during the interwar years and later into the 1940s and 1950s. Luminaries such as Ludwig von Mises, Thorstein Veblen, Herbert Simon, Robert K. Merton, and James Burnham, among others, wrote extensively about dynamics within, surrounding, and related to bureaucracies and provided much intellectual grounding for this study.⁴²

The creation and development of public choice theory provided significant additional impetus behind bureaucracy studies. In *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, political scientist Patrick Dunleavy argues that the inception of public choice-specific studies of bureaucracy date to two works: Anthony Downs's *Inside Bureaucracy* and William A. Niskanen's *Bureaucracy and Representative Government*.⁴³ Each of these studies makes many important points, and for the purposes of this book, develops equally important assumptions. Most critically, they initiated the microeconomic approach to studying individuals within government bureaucracies. Following in the foot-

⁴¹ "Office of the Chief Legislative Liaison (OCLL)," Army.mil; "Navy Office of Legislative Affairs," Navy.mil; and "Office of Legislative Affairs," HQMC.Marines.mil, all accessed on 13 November 2024.

⁴² Robert K. Merton et al., eds., *Reader in Bureaucracy* (New York: Free Press, 1968); James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1972); and Ludwig von Mises, *Bureaucracy*, ed. Bettina Bien Greaves (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2007).

⁴³ Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, 147; Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown 1967), <https://doi.org/10.7249/CB156>; and William A. Niskanen, *Bureaucracy and Public Economics* (Aldershot, UK: Edward Elgar, 1994).

steps of earlier public choice works, these studies used the basic fact that bureaucrats are people just like everyone else to build a case for understanding bureaucratic organizations' behavior. Each attributed to bureaucrats some degree of rational choice and some degree of utility maximization, which until this point had been rare. Importantly, however, both studies, along with studies of bureaucracy since, have differed on exactly *what* utility government bureaucrats were attempting to maximize. This remains an open question and point of contention to this day; it is one this book will return to and attempt to address for one unique and specific type of bureaucratic actor. It is obviously more difficult to articulate the underlying goals and motivations for government actors in many ways. Whereas private firms have a generally consistent goal of revenue maximization with many different incentives that help ensure members of these firms work toward the same goal, government bureaucracies do not have such clear outputs and can be notoriously difficult for outsiders to fully understand.⁴⁴

Recognizing that government agencies generally do not have a remit to maximize profits, Niskanen chose an analogous utility function and proposed that bureaucrats seek to maximize their agency's budget.⁴⁵ He primarily focused on top-level bureaucrats, assuming that positive outcomes would necessarily proceed from larger agency budgets. Anthony Downs, conversely, looked far more deeply at the inner workings of the different echelons of the bureaucracy. Downs took an instrumental approach, suggesting that there were several different archetypes of bureaucrats who each sought to maximize different things. He assigned eight different motivations, and subsequently classified bureaucrats by the amount of each they sought to maximize.⁴⁶ Downs and Niskanen also used different methodologies in their work; while Niskanen sought to develop a formal model of bureaucratic behavior, Downs's analysis was more informal in nature.⁴⁷ Despite his lack of formal modeling, Downs provided a more convincing treatment of the subject and had the right general approach. In a context specific to those who serve in the military, we will see that bureaucrats usually seek to maximize only one of Downs's possible motivations, however.

⁴⁴ This is generally recognized as the primary goal for private firms, although some organizational and management literature will dispute or assign a different value to this goal.

⁴⁵ He later modified this to "discretionary budget." See Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, 172.

⁴⁶ Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, 148–49.

⁴⁷ Mueller, "Gordon Tullock and Public Choice."

Importantly, only some public choice literature, such as Downs's *Inside Bureaucracy*, has a tradition of assessing the structure of organizations to understand motivations of individuals at all levels within the hierarchy. This was something of a gap in bureaucracy literature for many years within public choice accounts such as Niskanen's that focused almost entirely on the highest echelon of the bureaucracy, treating "the bureaucracy" as a unitary actor.⁴⁸ Later works like Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* were critical in the early study of bureaucratic politics in its own right, and since then it has become increasingly clear that each member of a bureaucratic hierarchy at each echelon should be assumed to have their own preferences with unique goals and utility functions, although the general utility function in the military remains the same at each echelon—status and reputation. The key difference is how each individual actor interprets this for themselves.

More modern bureaucracy studies have sought to continue the study of bureaucracies and bureaucratic politics in many different ways, most often examining specific agency structures, members, and activities during different periods of history. For example, political scientist Daniel Carpenter has written extensively on bureaucratic behavior in U.S. government executive agencies writ large during a specific period (1862–1928) as well as on the history of individual agencies.⁴⁹ Others have sought to use comparative models to understand bureaucracies, and still others have looked at them through more theoretical approaches.⁵⁰ Most applicable to this book is the use of bureaucratic politics models to understand foreign policy and grand strategic approaches. This harkens back to Allison's original work in *Essence of Decision*, and it remains a consistent theme, although it also remains somewhat less popular than what Allison called the "rational actor" model of government

⁴⁸ Niskanen, *Bureaucracy and Public Economics*; and Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971).

⁴⁹ Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Daniel Carpenter, *Reputation and Power: Organizational Image and Pharmaceutical Regulation at the FDA* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁵⁰ Carl Dahlström and Victor Lapuente, "Comparative Bureaucratic Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2022): 43–63, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-102543>; and John Brehm and Scott Gates, "Bureaucratic Politics Arising from, Not Defined by, a Principal–Agency Dyad," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25, no. 1 (2015): 27–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muu045>.

behavior.⁵¹ However, as noted previously, this sort of thinking is conspicuously absent in the literature on military structure and military decision making, and although modern scholarship on bureaucratic organizations continues to accumulate, it is far less popular as a field of study than it was in the early days of public choice scholarship.⁵²

The final element of public choice theory to discuss is the principal-agent problem. Far from belonging solely to public choice scholars, this widely recognized problem is also found as a—perhaps *the*—key concept within a semiseparate field of study known as agency theory, among many others. The principal-agent problem is essentially one of delegation. Each person who delegates some task or responsibility can be thought of as a *principal*, and each person who is expected to execute the given task or responsibility is an *agent*. Organization theorists John T. Luhman and Ann L. Cunliffe describe two main agency problems: “how to align the conflicting goals of principals and agents, and how to ensure agents perform in the way principals expect them to.”⁵³ This is a difficult problem in almost any realm of human interaction, but two features common to real-world application of public choice theory greatly exacerbate it. First, modern bureaucracies are complex, highly structured, and difficult to understand without deep knowledge of the circumstances of how they were designed and subsequent “situational imperatives” that shaped and continue to shape the organization.⁵⁴ Second, given the basic

⁵¹ Allison, *Essence of Decision*. For foreign policy, see Daniel W. Drezner, “Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics, and the Crafting of Foreign Policy,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2000): 733–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669278>; and Francis E. Rourke, *Bureaucracy and Foreign Policy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972). For grand strategy, see Richard Hanania, *Public Choice Theory and the Illusion of American Grand Strategy: How Generals, Weapons Manufacturers, and Foreign Governments Shape American Foreign Policy* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2022).

⁵² For a somewhat rare exception to this gap in the literature, see Paul T. Mitchell, “Ideas, Interests, and Strategy: Bureaucratic Politics and the United States Navy,” *Armed Forces and Society* 25, no. 2 (1999): 243–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9902500204>. Nonetheless, this discussion remains focused at the highest, decision-maker levels. The current volume describes the phenomenon of bureaucratic politics as existing at every echelon. For a discussion of the decline in bureaucracy studies, see Jessica Glick Turnley, “Bureaucracies, Networks and Warfare in a Fluid Operating Environment,” in *Military Mission Formations and Hybrid Wars*, ed. Thomas Vladimir Brond, Uzi Ben-Shalom, and Eyal Ben-Ari (London: Routledge, 2020), 65, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367855390>.

⁵³ John T. Luhman and Ann L. Cunliffe, *Key Concepts in Organization Theory* (London: Sage, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473914643>.

⁵⁴ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 31–47.

assumption of public choice theory that every actor has their own interests and goals, it is nearly impossible to suggest that a bureaucracy or organization should be treated as a unitary actor, although as discussed in chapter 1, that is exactly what most military decision-making theories do. Each member of a bureaucracy is both a principal and an agent in multiple formal and informal hierarchies. Unless *every* member of the hierarchy shares all goals equally and seeks to maximize exactly the same things, the principal-agent problem will always exist, and it will be increasingly difficult to manage as bureaucracies become more complex over time.⁵⁵

Public Choice Applications to the Military

The U.S. military is an intricate and byzantine bureaucracy that has continued to increase in scope and complexity. Although there have been many studies of military command, military operations, and a significant number of popular treatments that tell specific “war stories,” few have looked at the military through a lens of public choice theory, incorporating the specific features found in public choice studies of bureaucracy and examining the principal-agent problem in detail in such a complex hierarchy. There have been several studies that incorporate elements of this discipline however. Mentioned earlier, in 1971 Graham Allison integrated several different streams of decision-making and organization theories into what became his book *Essence of Decision*. A seminal book, it developed several different models for understanding how decisions were made in the Cuban Missile Crisis and laid the foundation for many future studies. It did not, however, look deeply into military bureaucracies or seek to understand decision making within the military apparatus to the degree we will examine them here.⁵⁶

Later, Barry R. Posen looked at what he termed *organization theory* in his groundbreaking 1984 book *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*.⁵⁷ Although he did consider many of the likely conclusions organization theory would suggest when he examined the methods by which different militaries approached innovation and grand strategy, his interest was far more focused on the output of the given bureaucracies. He did not consider the internal workings of the various or-

⁵⁵ Pertti Haaparanta and Mikko Puhakka, “Bureaucracy and Time Consistency,” *Economics & Politics* 5, no. 3 (1993): 241–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0343.1993.tb00077.x>.

⁵⁶ Allison, *Essence of Decision*.

⁵⁷ Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

ganizations beyond the highest echelons. Similarly, Harvey M. Sapolsky has written of defense politics. In *US Defense Politics: The Origins of Security Policy*, Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Caitlin Talmadge seek to understand how the various parts of the United States “defense apparatus” negotiate between themselves to achieve what becomes U.S. national security policy. This also takes a top-echelon approach; although it attempts to consider the specific politics and logrolling between key defense constituencies, it also does not examine the internal bureaucratic politics of the military, instead focusing on the interplay between defense contractors, military Services, Congress, the Executive Branch, and other interested parties.⁵⁸

Other authors have looked at segments of the military bureaucracy; some, like Robert W. Komer, wrote on specific conflicts and the military’s failings.⁵⁹ Amy Zegart, conversely, wrote using a public choice-like methodology to analyze the creation and context behind particular bureaucracies in the broader “defense establishment” (her preferred terminology was *new institutionalism*; this discipline shares many features with public choice analyses of bureaucracy).⁶⁰ Edward N. Luttwak wrote a profoundly cynical book in the 1980s that nonetheless pinpointed many of the problems of bureaucracy that this study will also recognize, although his analysis was more specific and policy oriented than this one will be.⁶¹ Richard Hanania recently published a work applying public choice theory to American grand strategy, where he argues that the same self-interested nature of actors that this book discusses are important motivators for shaping U.S. grand strategy as a whole.⁶² Finally, Anthony King recently wrote about the modern art of command (discussed in Chapter 1), where he makes the case that modern command has shifted from a “heroic” model that can focus on a unitary leader and disregard their staff and instead is now much more of a managerial model that depends almost entirely on a leader’s management and employment of their staff.⁶³

Each of these works and many others have laid the foundation for more

⁵⁸ Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Caitlin Talmadge, *US Defense Politics: The Origins of Security Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁵⁹ Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1972).

⁶⁰ Zegart, *Flawed by Design*.

⁶¹ Edward Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War: The Question of Military Reform* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

⁶² Hanania, *Public Choice Theory and the Illusion of American Grand Strategy*.

⁶³ Anthony King, *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108642941>.

deliberate study of the military bureaucracy. James Q. Wilson also helped build this foundation when he wrote his outstanding *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. This book is far from focused on the military; however, it does scratch the surface of the military bureaucracy. In it, Wilson uses military vignettes and considers more general circumstances that affect military organizations to build his argument. The argument here, however, is somewhat outcome-focused. It looks at a collection of individual behaviors and activities that shape the agencies within which they occur. Indeed, Wilson directly states that, “given these great differences in how the work of government agencies actually gets defined, it is foolish to speak about bureaucracy as if it were a single phenomenon.”⁶⁴ This is exactly right; to understand any one bureaucratic organization, one must focus on *that* organization. A grand theory of bureaucracy may be impossible just as any grand theory of human interaction will be either so vague as to be unhelpful or so specific as to be entirely based on circumstance and individual proclivities. To understand an organization, one must apply theory to that unique and specific organization directly, considering its goals, its tasks, and the overall system that shapes it at multiple echelons of the hierarchy. All too often, we prefer to examine only the level of leadership and big decisions. This may not provide a true explanation of what actually happens within the organization we seek to explain.

⁶⁴ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 48.

Chapter 3

Military Bureaucracy

Every man is an individual with his own private ends and ambitions. He will carry out assigned tasks only if this proves to be the best way of attaining his own ends, and he will make every effort to change the tasks so as to make them more in keeping with these objectives. A machine will carry out instructions given to it. A man is not so confined.

~ Gordon Tullock¹

To anyone who has spent time in the orbit of military bureaucracy, the basic ideas described here will likely appear so obvious as to be banal, but there is also no obvious antecedent in the literature that describes military decision making and command structures. Discussion of the military bureaucracy can often be found in fiction such as *Catch-22* or first-person memoirs, but it has rarely been discussed as a significant item in its own right.² Public choice theory provides a foundation to examine the military bureaucracy and explain real-world military decision making and actions more effectively than the top-down decision models outlined in chapter 1.

Bureaucracy Studies

As the previous chapter briefly described, the study of bureaucracies began in the 1890s and early 1900s with Max Weber's foundational sociology, although many of his most important works were not published in English until the 1930s and 1940s. By that time, other sociologists had picked up the

¹ Gordon Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, ed. Charles K. Rowley, vol. 6 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 35.

² Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

mantle and considered the many different dynamics of human behavior and relationships present in large bureaucracies. This coincided, of course, with one of the largest and most rapid bureaucratic expansions in history as the New Deal reform programs following the Great Depression and World War II combined to create a new form of American government.³ The mid-1960s saw a second explosion of the size, scope, and power of the American government bureaucracy as the Vietnam War combined with Lyndon B. Johnson's domestic agenda, "the Great Society," and a number of other domestic government programs to fully instantiate the bureaucratic nature of American society.⁴

The study of bureaucracy became a growth industry coincident with this explosion in the 1960s and 1970s; however, as the size, scope, and influence of bureaucracies became a normal fact of everyday life, it showed a marked decline. Indeed, from 1960 to 1980, a Google Ngram search of the term *bureaucracy* shows an extraordinary spike in this field of study, followed by a significant decrease after the early 1980s.⁵ Despite the apparent decrease in interest, however, studies of bureaucracy remain important and there are many disparate fields that participate in this type of study. Although the specific field of bureaucracy studies (or related terms) has decreased in prevalence and prestige during the past 40 years, it nonetheless remains a necessary element of study to a broad array of associated disciplines.

However, as with all human behavior, there is no single unifying theory or understanding of why people within bureaucracies or hierarchies do what they do, despite many attempts to create them. Perhaps equally important, many of the disciplines that have some interest in the study of bureaucracy and hierarchy appear to have ignored—deliberately or otherwise—significant research that might inform theories of behavior within their fields. As Robert F. Durant ably described in *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, the debate "rages on today in research studying American Bureaucracy in

³ Joanna L. Grisinger, *The Unwieldy American State: Administrative Politics since the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139030373>.

⁴ Amity Shlaes, *Great Society: A New History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019). For a discussion of the changing status of rules coincident with the expansion of government bureaucracy, see Paul Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 46.

⁵ "Google Books Ngram Viewer," Google.com, accessed 19 December 2022. Of note, there was a slight increase in interest in the early to mid 1990s, followed by a precipitous decline.

political science, public administration, public management, American Political Development, history, sociology, and public policy.” He further explains that “these debates have taken place over the past three decades across and within these fields, with scholars either unaware of or deliberately ignoring developments in cognate fields that might inform and advance research in their own.”⁶ In many ways, and as Durant explains, studies of how and why things happen within bureaucracies have largely proceeded in a parallel fashion instead of in a sequential fashion. This has resulted in an extraordinarily confused landscape of things that might fit within the broad rubric of bureaucracy studies.

Additionally, there are several disciplines that have almost entirely neglected important parts of this field of study. Amy Zegart describes how much of what happens *within* bureaucracies is anathema to many political scientists who focus on international relations and the broad field of security studies: “these types of internal organizational variables are precisely the ones that most political scientists prefer to avoid.”⁷ Despite the general preference of international relations theorists and other security-oriented political scientists to treat government bureaucracies as “black boxes,” there is nonetheless a recognition by even the most adamant of these theorists that events, personalities, and political interactions within government bureaucracies can and often do exert significant effects on the actions of governments and their constituent parts.⁸ This recognition has not resulted in extensive study however. As Zegart describes, much of the “heavy lifting” in this regard has fallen to management studies and organization theory, among others, during the past 40 years.⁹

Military Bureaucracy Studies

There is also a significant gap in bureaucracy literature. The single largest bureaucracy in the United States government, and thus also one of the largest in the history of the world, remains curiously understudied as a bureaucracy

⁶ Robert F. Durant, “A Heritage Made Our Own,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, ed. Robert F. Durant (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238958.001.0001>.

⁷ Amy Zegart, “Agency Design and Evolution,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, 207–30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238958.003.0009>.

⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010).

⁹ Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

in its own right. Using its own numbers, the U.S. military apparatus is responsible for *at least* one-third of the size of the United States government.¹⁰ However, it rarely figures into modern studies of bureaucracy. For example, one of the authoritative texts on American bureaucracy, *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, generally neglects the military and a Google Ngram of the subject shows an even more significant relative decline in military bureaucracy studies than it does for bureaucracy studies writ large.¹¹ This is a significant omission. Although the U.S. military, and militaries in general, are in many ways unique organizations, in many of the most important ways they are bureaucracies like any other major government agency. One important caveat is necessary here: this book takes a generally more expansive view of bureaucracy than many other studies, so for the purposes of analyzing the military *all* members of a formal hierarchy are defined as part of a bureaucracy. This is much broader than many other analyses, but for the purposes of analyzing problems particular to military organization and relationships, it is nonetheless useful.¹²

Regardless of how broadly or narrowly the term is applied, studies of the internal politics and actions of military bureaucracies—and military bureaucrats—are lacking. The apparent lack of interest in this topic remains curious indeed. Almost since people began studying and thinking about bureaucracies, the military has been involved. Carl von Clausewitz, one of the most important Western military thinkers in the last several hundred years, wrote much about the internal politics of military forces in his magnum opus, *On War*.¹³ Later, the Prussian military served as *the* primary example of hierarchical bureaucratic structure in Max Weber's creation of the field of sociology.

¹⁰ "What Are the Largest Federal Agencies?," OPM.gov, accessed 14 November 2024. The three largest Service departments (Navy, Army, Air Force) make up approximately 30 percent of U.S. government agency personnel. This does not include Department of Defense (DOD) or other associated personnel who are not considered a part of the three Services. This means the actual size of the DOD is far larger than just the 30 percent number associated with these three specific agencies.

¹¹ "Google Books Ngram Viewer," Google.com, accessed 19 December 2022.

¹² This definition corresponds largely the one Gordon Tullock uses in *The Politics of Bureaucracy*, defining bureaucratic politics as any social situation in which the dominant or primary relations are those between superior and subordinate. This clearly corresponds to most, although not all, relationships found in military hierarchies. Later chapters will also discuss relationships with less apparent status delineations. See Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, 13–14.

¹³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

He specifically used the military structure to describe his prototypical hierarchy; in his work, the military approached what he characterized as the “ideal type” of hierarchical bureaucracy.¹⁴ Even though more than a hundred years have passed since Weber wrote of the ideal type, the general structure of most militaries around the world remains much closer to Weber’s ideal than other bureaucracies to this day.¹⁵

There are several possible reasons for the gap in modern thinking and discussion about military bureaucracies. First, early thinkers and theorists often lumped the military together with all other bureaucracies. As they developed “grand theories of bureaucracy,” many treated all government agencies and occasionally private bureaucracies as the same. This sort of conflation is apparent in a number of early works such as Gordon Tullock’s *The Politics of Bureaucracy*, Ludwig von Mises’ *Bureaucracy*, Robert Merton et al.’s *Reader in Bureaucracy*, and of course Weber’s seminal work.¹⁶ Instead of conflating military bureaucracy with the mass of other agencies, some other early thinkers instead used the military as their model for an ideal bureaucracy, much like Weber did, and then subsequently extrapolated and applied the conclusions to a wide range of other government organizations. Anthony Downs’s seminal work for Rand on behalf of the U.S. Air Force, *Inside Bureaucracy*, is an example of this.¹⁷

Second, the post 9/11 environment has been a chilling one for studies that might appear critical of the military in general and of military bureaucracy in particular. Whether intended or not, much of the literature surrounding these studies tends to hold connotations of “evil, self-interested bureau-

¹⁴ Note that Weber used the term *ideal* in a scientific sense, not in a normative one. Similar to Clausewitz’s use of *absolute war*, he was explaining a logical extreme and not suggesting that was a type of organization to strive to achieve. For in depth discussion of Weber’s military experience and thought regarding the military as a bureaucracy see Glynn Cochrane, *Max Weber’s Vision for Bureaucracy: A Casualty of World War I* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, an imprint of Springer Nature, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62289-7>.

¹⁵ Joseph Soeters, *Sociology and Military Studies: Classical and Current Foundations* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 9–11, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315182131>.

¹⁶ Tullock, *Bureaucracy*; Ludwig von Mises, *Bureaucracy*, ed. Bettina Bien Greaves (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2007); Robert K. Merton, *Reader in Bureaucracy* (New York: Free Press, 1968); and Cochrane, *Max Weber’s Vision for Bureaucracy*.

¹⁷ Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1964).

crats.”¹⁸ This negatively slanted or seemingly cynical view of the American military bureaucracy would clearly have been anathema to most thinkers in the years immediately following 11 September 2001, a time when the “rally around the flag effect” held the greatest sway.¹⁹ The general chilling effect that many scholars have attributed to this phenomenon combined with a situation largely unique in American history, where an all-volunteer military force was framed by the larger political environment and specifically within the mass media as “heroes,” “protecting Americans.”²⁰ These two elements likely combined to limit the amount of scholarship undertaken with a skeptical eye. This is not to suggest that there are not many scholars of integrity who continue to follow their research where it takes them; however, it would be difficult to argue that the post-9/11 environment combined with multiple wars that involved an ever-shrinking population of Americans did not create a situation that exerted some limiting influence on the amount and nature of studies of the military bureaucracy during the past two decades.

Finally, there has been a general decrease in academic studies of military subjects since the end of the Cold War.²¹ Some disciplines, like military history and military science, have declined significantly over time, while others like military sociology and general military studies remain generally unpopular or niche fields.²² In one recent book, political scientist Michael Desch described how the academic field of security studies has declined in popularity and ap-

¹⁸ Perhaps the most famous version of this connotation comes from Ronald W. Reagan’s famous quote “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m from the Government and I’m here to help’.” Ronald W. Reagan, “The President’s News Conference,” 12 August 1986, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. See David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 8–10.

¹⁹ For discussions of this phenomenon in the pre- and post-9/11 years, see William D. Baker and John R. Oneal, “Patriotism or Opinion Leadership?: The Nature and Origins of the ‘Rally ‘Round the Flag’ Effect,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 5 (2001): 661–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002701045005006>; and Tim Groeling and Matthew A. Baum, “Crossing the Water’s Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon,” *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 4 (2008): 1065–85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608081061>.

²⁰ Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., “Introduction,” in *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 2; Dennis Laich, *Skin in the Game: Poor Kids and Patriots* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2013); and David Rothkopf, “‘We Fail Better’ Should Not Be the Motto of the U.S. Military,” podcast, Foreign Policy, 19 October 2015.

²¹ Ben Connable, *Ground Combat: Puncturing the Myths of Modern War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025), xii.

²² For example, see “Google Books Ngram Viewer,” Google.com, accessed 19 December 2022.

plicability to its subject matter, memorably referring to it as the “cult of the irrelevant.”²³ Notably, many of the most famous students of security studies, civil-military relations, military sociology, and other more general military related topics have long since moved on from the academic scene, although their works remain important for the military community. To some degree, this may be the example that proves the point: despite a drastically changed security environment, national culture, and military than the one studied in the 1950s and 1960s, military sociologists such as Samuel P. Huntington and Morris Janowitz remain widely read and discussed among military thinkers, as do theorists of the time like Bernard Brodie or Thomas C. Schelling.²⁴

Although essentially all the works mentioned in the preceding paragraphs were, and remain, significant contributions to military studies in general, much has changed since each of them was written. However, one thing that has not changed is the overall performance of the broader American national security bureaucracy. As Amy Zegart pointed out, “At some base level, the modern American national security apparatus has not performed up to par since its inception after World War II.”²⁵ The military is not immune to this problem. Despite extraordinary efforts during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the U.S. military cannot honestly claim to have been successful in the wars it fought during this period. Although many within the military structure make claims of victory in battle redolent of the Vietnam War (1954–75), it is glaringly clear that the political objectives for which the military went to war were not achieved. At best, it managed to fight its way to a draw in Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–11), followed by a return to Iraq to continue the fight during Operation Inherent Resolve (2014–present). At the time of this writing, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve continues, albeit greatly reduced in size, and the future of Iraq remains unclear at best. In Afghanistan, it would be difficult to claim anything other than a defeat. In August 2021, the United States finally withdrew the remain-

²³ Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

²⁴ This is not to argue that these works do not have enduring utility, only that it is notable that despite a drastically changed national security environment, they remain foundational. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 1957); Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960); Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2007); and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

²⁵ Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 9.

der of its forces in an extremely flawed operation; the Afghan National Army and Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan fell to a resurgent Taliban only days later. Scholar/practitioner Mara E. Karlin described it as the “search for an ersatz victory” by a military that neither fully understood nor had a plan to fully realize a strategy that could accomplish clear political goals in these conflicts.²⁶ Each of these events, with their associated missteps, misuse of blood and treasure, and basic management flaws have combined with increasing distrust in American society to degrade the once extraordinarily high levels of trust the American public once held for its military.²⁷ It is clearly time to discuss military bureaucracies in-depth once again.

Before discussing the characteristics inherent to military bureaucracy and its members, it may be necessary to articulate exactly what we mean when referring to *bureaucracy*. Here, as many places, Anthony Downs provided the best description, although Max Weber also provided a useful definition of bureaucracy more than a century ago. By Downs’s criteria, “a bureau is any organization that exhibits every one of four primary characteristics, and some (but not necessarily all), of a number of secondary characteristics.” The four primary characteristics of bureaus are: first, size, in that the organization must be large; second, most of the workers must be full-time and dependent on the organization for the bulk of their income; third, hiring, assessment, and retention of personnel must be based on merit *within* the organization; and fourth, the primary output of the organization is not directly or indirectly exchanged in any type of market external to the organization.²⁸ Weber included several more characteristics that Downs considers secondary yet still important and at least common within bureaus. These secondary characteristics are hierarchical organization, impersonality of operations, extensive use of rules, complexity of administrative tasks, secrecy, and employment of special-

²⁶ Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military after Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 30–33.

²⁷ For examples of general flaws in the prosecution of these wars, see Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021). For a discussion of managerialism and its evolution within the military, see Leo McCann, “‘Killing Is Our Business and Business Is Good’: The Evolution of ‘War Managerialism’ from Body Counts to Counterinsurgency,” *Organization* 24, no. 4 (2017): 491–515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417693852>. For a recent example of declining public trust in the military, see “2023 Reagan National Defense Survey,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, November 2023.

²⁸ Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 24–25.

ly trained personnel on a career basis.²⁹ Even the most casual observer of the United States military—and indeed, any Westernized military force—will be able to see that all or nearly all these characteristics are intrinsic to those organizations.

That established, Downs also argues that *all* bureaucracies share seven general attributes. They all have a “hierarchical structure, hierarchical formal communications networks, extensive systems of formal rules, informal authority structures, informal and personal communications networks, formal impersonality of operations, and intensive personal loyalty and personal involvement among officials, particularly in the highest ranks of the hierarchy.”³⁰ Again, each of these is easy to identify within the normal operations of the military; by Downs’s definition, it is clear that the military fits well within this rubric.

Thus, based on Max Weber’s original definition/description and Anthony Downs’s groundbreaking 1967 work, the military organization is a bureaucracy. Are members of it to be considered bureaucrats? The answer is a resounding yes. Although not every member of a bureau should be considered a bureaucrat, members of active-duty militaries fit Downs’s definition well.³¹ They are members of a large organization, they are employed by it full-time, they derive their livelihood from it, their promotion and evaluation is based almost entirely on their role performance within the organization, and their output cannot be evaluated by an external market, but instead can only be evaluated in relation to performance within the organization.³² A critical point within this definition is that the term bureaucrat is absolutely not a pejorative here. It simply refers to someone who fits the above characteristics and works within an organization that meets the definition of a *bureau*. How-

²⁹ Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 25; and Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 196–204.

³⁰ Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 49.

³¹ One might argue that members of reserve forces and/or militia-type forces like U.S. state and National Guard organizations only fit Downs’s definition when actually serving and subject to military law and regulation. This is a reasonable distinction; for purposes of brevity and focus, however, this analysis omits discussion of these unique arrangements. An interesting avenue for future discussion and research would be the differences in bureaucratic motivation, operation, and characteristics between active-duty militaries and its reserve components. The differences would likely be significantly greater than most observers within the military and outside it would initially be inclined to think.

³² Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 26.

ever, since the term bureaucrat has taken on many negative connotations and is often used in a pejorative manner, this text will generally refer to the term using servicemember, military member, or similar throughout.

The Theory

Having stated the criteria that place the military into a theory of bureaucracy, next we will address its broad contours and then develop it further. The theory is based on several assumptions. They generally correspond to the “three central hypotheses” developed by Anthony Downs in his landmark 1967 study, *Inside Bureaucracy*, with some specific updates. It is worth quoting him at length here.

Specifically, the theory rests on three central hypotheses:

1. Bureaucratic officials (and all other social agents) seek to attain their goals rationally. In other words, they act in the most efficient manner possible given their limited capabilities and the cost of information. Hence all the agents in our theory are utility maximizers. In practical terms, this implies that whenever the cost of attaining any given goal rises in terms of time, effort, or money, they seek to attain less of that goal, other things being equal. Conversely, whenever the cost of attaining a goal falls, they seek to attain more of it.
2. Bureaucratic officials in general have a complex set of goals including power, income, prestige, security, convenience, loyalty (to an idea, an institution, or the nation), pride in excellent work, and desire to serve the public interest. This book [*Inside Bureaucracy*] postulates five different types of officials, each of which pursues a different subset of the above goals. But regardless of the particular goals involved, every official is significantly motivated by his own self-interest even when acting in a purely official capacity.
3. Every organization’s social functions strongly influence its internal structure and behavior, and vice versa. This premise may seem rather obvious, but some organization theorists have in effect contradicted it by focusing their analyses almost exclusively on what happens *within* an organization.³³

³³ Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 2–3.

These three hypotheses clearly establish a basis for the perspective this book intends to explore: rational goal seeking and self-interest, shaped by the dynamics unique to a specific organization. There are differences however. Primarily they lie with Downs's hypotheses two and three. In the second hypothesis, the divergence might be merely one of focus. Whereas Downs has identified a broad set of goals that bureaucrats in many different organizations or agencies might seek (depending very much on where they work and/or their specific incentive structures), this book addresses only a single, primary one. Downs described a broad, crosscutting theory of multiple bureaucracies and sought to develop a much broader work than we seek here. In the case of the military, due to factors discussed in later pages, the primary goal for nearly all its members is what Downs calls *prestige*, and this text will refer to as *status* and *reputation*.³⁴

Downs's third hypothesis essentially claims that it is impossible to understand an organization without understanding what it is that organization is designed to do and how it does it. Without stating it directly, he describes the complex interactivity of organizations and their environments. James Q. Wilson similarly discussed the difficulty of trying to understand government bureaucracies without paying heed to the myriad circumstances that determine the nature of a specific organization. Organizational culture, how the organization defines specific tasks, situational imperatives, and peer expectations are all elements he describes as interacting with and shaping the organization over time.³⁵ While stipulating this to be accurate, the current work will generally omit much discussion of specific organizations *within* the broad context of "the military."³⁶ This volume focuses entirely on that category of bureaucracy—more specifically, the U.S. military, although there is some consistency with other Western or professionalized military forces referenced throughout

³⁴ In older social science literature, the terms *prestige* and *status* are often used interchangeably. In *Inside Bureaucracy*, Downs referred to what we now call "social status" or just status. In more modern literature, the terms prestige, status, reputation, and several others have been developed as separate but closely related topics. We will discuss this more in-depth later in the chapter.

³⁵ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 31–49.

³⁶ There are a multitude of obvious differences between individual military Services and even among the cultures within them. The author does not intend to minimize these, although they are not a focal point for this volume. For additional discussion of this phenomenon, see Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

the book—and thus will assume hypothesis three to be both correct and not requiring extensive interrogation.³⁷

To restate the key items from above as they apply here: first, all members of the military are members of the military bureaucracy. Second, members of any bureaucracy are as rational as possible given human cognitive limitations. They apply “bounded rationality” as a general heuristic style. People respond to incentives and usually act in accordance with their preferences. Although people are able to choose based on what would seem to be their rational preferences (i.e. acting against their own self-interest), even then there is probably a good reason for their actions. As a general rule, people prefer to act in ways that benefit themselves, even if the exact benefit or motivation is not immediately or obviously clear. Although in most Western cultures self-interest usually has a negative connotation, in this case it does not automatically indicate selfish or nonaltruistic activity. It simply means acting in accordance with one’s preferences (whatever those preferences might be). Additionally, although humans regularly act consciously to benefit themselves, the phenomenon known by neuroscientists as *confabulation* is real, ubiquitous, and in its most aggressive definition suggests that it is impossible to know which of our conscious actions are actually due to the story we tell ourselves about them. It is entirely possible—and some philosophers and scientists believe likely—that the conscious experience bears little or no resemblance to the true motivations for someone’s actions.³⁸ Thus, the current approach also assumes and discusses in later pages, the very real probability that even when individuals appear to be, or tell themselves that, they are neglecting their own self-interest, they are confabulating or deceiving themselves.

Third, although Downs identifies many different goals that a member of a bureaucracy might seek, military personnel are restrained from seeking many of them either by custom or law.³⁹ This requires additional discussion. The different goals Downs highlights include “power, income, prestige, se-

³⁷ There are obviously significant differences between the military Services and their unique tasks. However, the Joint Force, Service, and other related bureaucracies generally resemble each other enough that they can be treated as the same structure with the same incentives for the purposes of aggregate analysis.

³⁸ William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, 2006), 26.

³⁹ Although most of the custom or law discussed here are specific to the U.S. military, nearly every government throughout the world has instituted some mechanism to restrain its military from full-scale efforts to accrue many of Downs’s motivators. As will be described later, in more totalitarian systems this takes an extreme form known as “coup-proofing.”

curity, convenience, loyalty (to an idea, an institution, or the nation), pride in excellent work, and desire to serve the public interest.”⁴⁰ Although after a cursory review, one might think that many of them correlate to goals a service member might seek in the military, that is incorrect. In fact, there are many existing structures that prevent military personnel in the United States from directly seeking several of these, and most of the rest correlate directly with advancing status and reputation.

Downs’s first bureaucratic goal—power—is inherently (and deliberately) limited for servicemembers in several ways. Within the military structure, it is tied directly to formal rank. Unlike many civilian bureaucracies that have well-known power holders who do not hold commensurate rank or official position, in the military it is difficult to accrue power beyond that correlated with the formal social status granted by the organization: rank.⁴¹ In the modern U.S. military, rank is usually governed by a particularly strict promotion timeline that offers only the smallest possibility of advancing outside of very limited windows, inherently limiting the sort of rank-climbing behavior that might otherwise allow actors to seek power. While there are exceptions to strict promotion timelines, they are relatively rare and restricted for unique cases.⁴² Additionally, the way the military manages its personnel limits an individual’s ability to accrue power within or to a particular organization since servicemembers typically rotate to new units and duties every few years. This is particularly marked in senior leaders, as even the most long-lived tenures for senior leaders are rarely more than three or four years.⁴³ As Maureen Mylander wrote in the early 1970s, “the rapid turnover of generals is not entirely quixotic. One of the major rationales is based on the fear of . . . forming a

⁴⁰ Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 2.

⁴¹ Informal status and power are a consistent element of bureaucracies. A member of the military bureaucracy might accrue significant informal power; however, it is unlikely they will attain sufficient informal power to obviate the formal rank structure. This can be significantly different in civilian bureaucracies, and civilians within the military bureaucracy might also be found to have informal power beyond their formal organizational rank for many reasons. Informal status dynamics and power structure will be addressed more later.

⁴² “Promotion Timing, Zones, and Opportunity,” Rand Project Air Force, accessed 12 January 2025.

⁴³ This has many problematic effects that are beyond the scope of this paper. The rapid rotation of personnel does an excellent job of limiting the accrual of personal power, but the negative outcomes of degrading unit cohesion, limiting risk acceptance and trust within the ranks, and thus fundamentally exacerbating the principal-agent problem are significant problems that have existed since at least the Vietnam War. See Edward Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War: The Question of Military Reform* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

power dynasty by letting a man remain in a job long enough to really perform.”⁴⁴ Although much has changed in the U.S. military establishment since the post-Vietnam War years, this has not.

The law explicitly limits servicemembers’ income as well. In the United States, the military pay scale is publicly accessible, rigid, and nearly impossible to work around.⁴⁵ Servicemembers cannot maximize their pay and benefits any more than other servicemembers who share their rank, time in service, and physical location unless they deliberately violate the law (or find income sources outside the system). Thus, personal income maximization, as public choice theory thinks of it, is essentially impossible.⁴⁶ Most Western militaries deliberately limit their members’ abilities to accrue excessive wealth in this way, although it is not uncommon to see military servicemembers who live in so-called “kleptocracies” enriching themselves (usually, but not always, senior leaders).⁴⁷ Some public choice thinkers get around this problem—that bureaucrats in strictly regulated systems are restrained from seeking personal wealth—by arguing that government bureaucrats seek to increase their organizational budget instead.⁴⁸ This is possible, although likely to be seen only at the highest echelons of the Department of Defense, where military Services compete for resources. Resource competition in this manner might also make sense as a sort of status competition. We will discuss this in more detail shortly and will see examples of this later in chapter 6.

Security and convenience are somewhat less concrete subjects. In the case of these bureaucratic objectives, there is no strict law against maximizing for either of them; however, it is reasonable to speculate that the unique difficulties inherent in military life should generally make servicemembers more uninterested in maximizing these particular motivations than Downs’ average

⁴⁴ Maureen Mylander, *The Generals: Making It Military-Style* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), 192.

⁴⁵ “Military Compensation,” [Militarypay.Defense.gov](https://militarypay.defense.gov), accessed 12 January 2025.

⁴⁶ Lawrence Kapp and Barbara Salazar Torreon, *Military Pay: Key Questions and Answers* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020).

⁴⁷ Thomas Mayne, “What Is Kleptocracy and How Does It Work?,” Chatham House, 4 July 2022.

⁴⁸ Patrick Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice: Economic Approaches in Political Science* (London: Routledge, 1991), 172, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315835228>. Described earlier in chapter 2.

bureaucrat (or often unable to do so).⁴⁹ Indeed, if someone were to seek to maximize their personal security, it is unlikely that their chosen profession would be one in which they could potentially be called to sacrifice their life.⁵⁰ Alternatively, someone might choose to define security more narrowly, such as job security, perhaps. Even then, the military would be a poor choice for those who might want to maximize for that category. In the United States, the strict up-or-out promotion system, the vagaries of military budgets, and the “20-year cliff” retirement system make the military system one in which job security is far less assured and far more difficult to maximize than many other bureaucratic organizations, although this may be a more common goal within other militaries across the world.⁵¹ As a curious aside, military sociology surveys from the 1950 and 1960s noted that there was a public perception at the time that military service was, in fact, more secure than civilian life. Even at the time, however, this was a puzzling finding that did not comport with the realities of service.⁵² Convenience is another motivation that would be generally difficult to maximize in the U.S. military. The simple fact that military personnel move and change jobs on average every three years and are prevented by law from quitting or refusing their orders would seem to make this motivation unlikely as a primary goal for servicemembers. Although individuals may seek to increase their personal convenience while they are in a given location or serving in a specific duty, imputing that as a primary motive for members of the U.S. military would seem to be difficult.

The last three of Downs’s motivations—loyalty, pride, and desire to serve—are all typically associated with military personnel, and rightly so.

⁴⁹ There are also cultural influences on all of the different potential motivations a bureaucrat might maximize. Organizational culture will not be addressed in depth in this section; however, note that it is also likely that the organizational culture of the military would not support members who sought primarily security or convenience. There are many views of organizational culture; for a discussion of how culture shapes the circumstances of government bureaucracies, see Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 90–93.

⁵⁰ Although during major war the statistical likelihood of that occurring is low, an individual who would seek to maximize personal security as their primary motivation would nonetheless be unlikely to choose the military as a career path.

⁵¹ The “20-year cliff” retirement system has been replaced in the United States, although it remains in effect for many currently in military service. At the time of this writing, the effects of the blended retirement system that was instantiated in the mid 2010s remain to be seen. For in-depth breakdown of the different retirement systems used by the U.S. military, see “Military Compensation.”

⁵² Morris Janowitz, *Sociology and the Military Establishment* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1959), 53.

However, these are basically altruistic goals and do not comport with the public choice view of individual self-interest. Obviously, someone might prefer to act for any one or all of these reasons, however, it is unlikely that any of these are a self-interested actor's primary motivation. Indeed, all of these are likely to play a part in decisions a member of the bureaucracy makes, but none is likely to serve as the fundamental driver for basic decisions. Patrick Dunleavy wrote that there are "other-regarding functions that are simply illegitimate within a Public Choice perspective."⁵³ Moreover, modern research suggests that much of this sort of altruistic action might be considered a type of prestige-seeking instead; one way to accrue prestige is through maximizing the appearance of virtue. Individuals who appear to be motivated by altruistic intentions are in fact often maximizing the most important of Downs's categories—prestige or status.⁵⁴ We will return to this theme in subsequent chapters.

Before addressing Downs's last remaining bureaucratic motivator, however, there are several other models of bureaucratic utility maximizing often found in public choice theory. The two most common of these are the idea of budget maximization (mentioned above) and size maximization.⁵⁵ There are many reasons why these two ideas also do not fit well as descriptions of the military bureaucracy. First, size and budget maximization would only apply to the highest echelons of the Service bureaucracy. Since an operative description of bureaucratic behavior would require *most* members of a given bureaucracy to maximize for it, size and budget maximization will not work. Simply put, there are very few members of the military in the lowest officer and enlisted ranks who care about the size of their Service or the overall budget their leadership works with. As an idea of what bureaucratic leaders seek, size or budget maximization might have some currency, but as a theory of military bureaucratic action throughout the hierarchy it leaves something to be desired. Second, as Dunleavy described, even in agencies or organizations that might be expected to pursue this sort of utility function, "the existing empirical support for budget maximizing models is scanty in the extreme."⁵⁶

⁵³ Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, 165.

⁵⁴ Will Storr, *The Status Game: On Social Position and How We Use It* (London: William Collins, 2021), 39.

⁵⁵ For budget maximizing, see William A. Niskanen, *Bureaucracy and Public Economics* (Hants, UK: E. Elgar, 1994), 231–42; and Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, 145–47.

⁵⁶ Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, 247.

Military Members as Reputation and Status Maximizers

Nearly all of Downs's possible bureaucratic motivations along with several other public choice theorists' ideas are thus unlikely to obtain as *primary* motivations in the unique context of the military bureaucracy. What motivation remains? In Downs's terminology, prestige remains; in the context of this book, reputation management and status maximization remain. This pair of social concepts is the *sine qua non* of the military. The remainder of this chapter describes the details of this argument. Why, precisely, are members of the military focused on status and reputation? Is it merely process of elimination? The answer is no. As Downs articulated above and James Q. Wilson described in the previous chapter, the structure, social functions, and requirements of an organization will necessarily shape the behavior of its members. Conversely, the specific members of an organization—and their personal proclivities, individual goals, and specific psychology—will also shape the organization. There are many reasons that military personnel focus on status and reputation more than the average bureaucrat described in Downs's work; they are described here, and in the following chapters we will further explore the relevant research on status and reputation maximization in human societies and organizational hierarchies.

Despite writing in the previous paragraph that maximizing for status and reputation is not *merely* due to process of elimination, this factor does nonetheless matter. Given the discussion above, it seems reasonable to suggest that many members of the military will gravitate toward making status or reputation-based decisions simply because it is the path of least resistance, or phrased differently, it is the one avenue available for them to most effectively maximize utility. In fact, motivation to maximize any of the other categories above *also* depends on status because of the highly structured vertical hierarchy in the military paired with the laws governing its behavior, so formal status is almost always a necessary precondition for accruing any of the others. To wit: one cannot increase personal remuneration without promotion, one cannot increase power without rank and its concomitant duties, and one cannot maximize organizational budget without a position high enough in the service structure to advocate for it (e.g., to Congress or within the Department of Defense).

There are other, more fundamental reasons the most common bureaucratic motivation in the military is status and reputation focused however. First, status and reputation maximization are natural human instincts. A

broad swath of researchers, from social scientists to natural scientists to organizational theorists, recognize that social status may be one of the most important and fundamental drives of humanity (and many other species as well). This will be addressed in-depth in later chapters, but it is important to note that in many ways status maximization is likely to be common motivator for all bureaucrats (and all humans). Morris Janowitz, one of the paragons of military sociology, wrote that “officers are also concerned, like men in any profession, with their prestige.”⁵⁷

What Janowitz called prestige and this study calls status and reputation are particularly likely to be a, often *the*, primary motivation in the military environment. Writing about a different government agency in his magisterial *Reputation and Power*, Daniel Carpenter asks, “What if the metaphor for understanding regulators is neither the automaton nor the kleptocrat? What if, instead, it is the imperfect human official motivated neither by neutral competence nor by monetary enrichment nor by raw empowerment, but by status, esteem, legitimacy, and reputation? What if we look to different exemplars—the *status conscious military officer*?”⁵⁸ Some of the keenest thinkers in the modern study of bureaucracies recognize that military personnel are particularly preoccupied with status dynamics. Indeed, some evidence shows that military recruits are predisposed toward this trait *before* they join.

The demographics of militaries around the world are particularly skewed toward status seeking; this is a dynamic that begins with recruitment. Since the early days of hunter-gatherer tribes, those who fought on behalf of their group, whether tribe, nation-state, gang, or some other type of group, have been mostly young and male.⁵⁹ Although this trend has been slowly changing, nonetheless, as of 2020, official U.S. Department of Defense statistics stated that the makeup of the U.S. military was 83 percent male, with approximately 66 percent of the force under age 30.⁶⁰ This is important as there is significant evidence to support the idea that young males are far more disposed to status seeking than other demographics. Evolutionary biologists suggest that

⁵⁷ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, xl.

⁵⁸ Daniel Carpenter, *Reputation and Power: Organizational Image and Pharmaceutical Regulation at the FDA* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 43.

⁵⁹ Alberto J. C. Micheletti, Graeme D. Ruxton, and Andy Gardner, “Why War Is a Man’s Game,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 285, no. 1884 (August 2018): 20180975, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2018.0975>. Emphasis added.

⁶⁰ 2020 *Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, 2020).

many of the most obvious differences between men and women (on average) such as size, strength, voice tone, and others, evolved as both status markers and as ways to dominate other young males (dominance status pathways discussed in chapter 4).⁶¹ Beyond seeking direct dominance, status seeking in young men is particularly pronounced in a dynamic known as “competitive risk seeking,” or “status driven risk taking.”⁶² In short, young men compete for status a great deal more than other age or gender groups within society; hence, the demographic that makes up the vast preponderance of military personnel is exactly the one that focuses the most on status seeking. Recent research also appears to show that it is likely that those who join the military are more predisposed to status seeking behavior than their peers of the same age, gender, or socioeconomic status who do not.

Although the personality traits of recruits prior to entry into the military has been somewhat understudied, some evidence supports the assertion that those who join show proclivities for status seeking beyond their nonmilitary peers. In a 2012 study in *Psychological Science*, a team of psychologists studied a large longitudinal sample of German males who entered the military. They found that “results indicated that personality traits prospectively predicted the decision to enter the military. People lower in agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience during high school were more likely to enter the military after graduation.” They also assessed that lower levels of agreeableness persisted five years after training and that military experiences may have long-lasting influence on individual personality characteristics.⁶³ There are two reasons these findings are important. First, the preentry combination of personality traits they describe correlates with lower social status, and there is

⁶¹ Steve Stewart-Williams, *The Ape that Understood the Universe: How the Mind and Culture Evolve* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 103–6, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108763516>.

⁶² Michael C. Ashton et al., “Status-Driven Risk Taking and the Major Dimensions of Personality,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 44, no. 6 (December 2010): 734–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2010.09.003>.

⁶³ Joshua J. Jackson et al., “Military Training and Personality Trait Development: Does the Military Make the Man, or Does the Man Make the Military?,” *Psychological Science* 23, no. 3 (2012): 270–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611423545>. This study focuses outside of the U.S. military. This article is nonetheless suggestive and that similar dynamics would be likely within the United States due to the large number of commonalities in Western military training. However, the author concedes that there are many sociocultural differences between Germany and the United States and further study of this dynamic is necessary to fully prove the point.

significant evidence that low social status is associated with increased status sensitivity.⁶⁴ In this case, military recruiting may select for individuals who are *already* quite sensitive to social status differences. Second, each of the personality traits described in this study is negatively correlated with status attainment. Most important here is that individuals lower in the big five personality trait agreeableness (or higher in disagreeableness) are more likely to seek and attain increased status. Military recruiting and subsequent training appear to socialize or develop specific personality traits that are directly associated with status seeking and attainment.⁶⁵

Beyond developing or encouraging preexisting personality traits in its members, the military's indoctrination and socialization process probably has some additional responsibility here. As historian Peter S. Kindsvatter describes, "the soldier got his first taste of the Army's caste system during his initial training," encountering "what Lee Kennett calls 'institutionalized inequality'."⁶⁶ The presentation and emphasis of visible status symbols and intangible status differences at recruits' entrance into service is ubiquitous, deliberate, and constant. Almost immediately after beginning recruit training, there is an explicit focus on status differences between recruits and their instructors. Formal instruction addresses the military rank structure and the difference between recruits and higher ranks early and often. One of the earliest things military recruits learn to do is salute—an explicit act that "requires all ranks in the hierarchy to acknowledge the presence of those in a higher status position."⁶⁷ Entry-level military training makes its members hypersensitive to military-specific status differences, focusing primarily on rank and so-called "customs and courtesies." However, although the status hypersensitivity entry-level training formally encourages is often focused on visible,

⁶⁴ For example, see Michael W. Kraus et al., "Social Class Rank, Threat Vigilance, and Hostile Reactivity," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 10 (October 2011): 1376–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167211410987>.

⁶⁵ Cameron Anderson and Joe Cowan, "Personality and Status Attainment: A Micropolitics Perspective," in *The Psychology of Social Status*, ed. Joey T. Cheng, Jessica L. Tracy, and Cameron Anderson (New York: Springer, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-0867-7>. This is not to claim that the military deliberately socializes its members to seek social status, just that there is a clear correlation between changes in specific personality traits after entry into the military and the amount of status seeking behavior likely to be present in the same individuals.

⁶⁶ Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 56.

⁶⁷ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 221.

formal status indicators, it also inculcates significant awareness of less visible indicators such as physical fitness, ability to execute unique, unfamiliar tasks like disassembling and reassembling a rifle, or in some cases, direct physical confrontation—a type of status pathway known as dominance (discussed in chapter 4).⁶⁸

Some Services also focus their recruiting efforts on organizational status, with the associated implication (sometimes explicit, sometimes implied) that this will transfer from the organization to the individual. Within the U.S. military, the Marine Corps and special operations forces use this tactic most commonly, although the other Services do so as well. This sort of deliberate status description can be seen in recruiting slogans such as the Marines’ “Maybe you can be one of us,” or the Navy SEALs’ “It takes intense courage to be a Navy SEAL, and that’s what makes them the best of the best.”⁶⁹ This also manifests in ways both unintended and detrimental to military culture, such as the “sense of entitlement” identified by U.S. Special Operations Command’s *Comprehensive Ethics Review* in 2020. Without saying it directly, this document implied that many special operations forces recruits and other personnel see themselves as higher status than other servicemembers and often act accordingly.⁷⁰ This sort of elitism is not unique to parts of the U.S. military or U.S. special operations forces alone; for example, it is also described in detail by the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force’s 2020 *Afghanistan Inquiry Report*.⁷¹ Military sociologist William C. Cockerham also described it in-depth in a detailed study of airborne training that focuses less on the type of unit and more on milestones found in a general military training pipeline.⁷²

⁶⁸ For the best narrative description of a recruit training experience, see Thomas E. Ricks, *Making the Corps*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Scribner, 2007). Although this account was written in the mid-1990s, Marine Corps recruit training has changed very little since the 1950s. During the twenty-first century, there have been some major changes such as gender integration, which is an ongoing effort at the time of this writing, but the basic composition and structure of boot camp (basic training) remains essentially the same.

⁶⁹ Ricks, *Making the Corps*, 32; and “U.S. Navy SEAL Careers,” Navy.com, accessed 15 November 2024.

⁷⁰ *Comprehensive Ethics Review* (Washington, DC: U.S. Special Operations Command, 2020), 42.

⁷¹ William C. Cockerham, “Selective Socialization: Airborne Training as Status Passage,” *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 1, no. 2 (1973): 215–29; and *Afghanistan Inquiry Report* (Canberra: Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force, 2020).

⁷² Cockerham, “Selective Socialization.”

Broadly described, military culture is also generally more disposed than most other cultures to status sensitivity. Geert Hofstede's pioneering work on different culture types is useful in this regard. In his framing, Hofstede used empirical survey data to build a theory about cultural differences in organizations and societies. He divided these differences into four dimensions (later five): power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.⁷³ Most germane to the conversation here is *power distance*. This concept refers to the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that the distribution of power will be unequal. Societies marked by high power distance generally accept hierarchical relationships and accord greater respect and deference to people at the top of the hierarchy. Militaries around the world and through time are examples of cultures with extremely high-power distance.⁷⁴ This is important, as high-power distance cultures are typically more sensitive to status differences. There is also some recent evidence that members of cultures structured this way are also more likely to exhibit narcissistic personality traits, which are highly correlated with status seeking behavior.⁷⁵ Thus, if a given culture is marked by significant gradations of social status, it stands to reason that its members would be relatively more sensitive to that measure.⁷⁶ Military cultures are obvious candidates for this exact phenomenon. As military sociologist Charles C. Moskos wrote, "simply put, the internal stratification of the military is founded almost entirely on status rather than income distinctions. The serviceman witnesses a constant attention to rank in every connection.

⁷³ Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010).

⁷⁴ Stephen J. Gerras, Leonard Wong, and Charles D. Allen, *Organizational Culture: Applying a Hybrid Model to the U.S. Army* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, 2008).

⁷⁵ Peter K. Jonason et al., "Country-Level Correlates of the Dark Triad Traits in 49 Countries," *Journal of Personality* 88, no. 6 (2020): 1252–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12569>. Interestingly, this appears to vary by gender. Given that the majority of military personnel are male, the author will not explore this topic extensively, although it will be addressed briefly in a later chapter. For a discussion of status seeking and specific personality traits, see Anderson and Cowan, "Personality and Status Attainment."

⁷⁶ Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*, 77; Huachao Gao, Karen Page Winterich, and Yinlong Zhang, "All that Glitters Is Not Gold: How Others' Status Influences the Effect of Power Distance Belief on Status Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 43, no. 2 (2016): 265–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw015>; and Jennifer L. Aaker, "Delineating Culture," *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 16, no. 4 (2006): 343–47, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1604_4.

All of his on-duty activities and much of his off-duty life correspond to his military status.”⁷⁷

Some might suggest this is purely a result of the formal rank structure and explicit focus on status differences found in most militaries. Historically, rank, awards, uniforms, and other insignia are all status indicators that most militaries have intentionally and blatantly displayed—note that other military-adjacent organizations like insurgencies or terror groups are often recognized as having their own semiformal status symbols, often related to so-called “prestige weapons.”⁷⁸ It would also stand to reason that this sort of ostentatious status display would make members of the military particularly sensitive, but only to the status indicators specific to the formal hierarchy. This is only the tip of the iceberg however. It is true that servicemembers are far more sensitive to the formal, visible status indicators of their unique culture than are most civilians or others who live outside it; we would expect any insular culture to be uniquely sensitive to its own status indicators.⁷⁹

Military servicemembers, however, are also highly sensitive to informal and unseen status differences. Instead of taking the uniform at face value, they instead parse indicators that are neither visible nor easily understood by outside observers.⁸⁰ In years past, some military Services, such as the U.S. Marine Corps, deliberately sought to limit visible status discriminators to prevent identification with branches or communities within them.⁸¹ Although a deliberate effort and laudable impulse, it is unclear whether it had any effect on the status seeking activity of servicemembers. In the post-9/11 era, the

⁷⁷ Charles C. Moskos Jr., *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), 45–46.

⁷⁸ C. J. Chivers, *The Gun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 380–83.

⁷⁹ There is plenty of evidence, however, that Americans in particular are very sensitive to and interested in the gravitas and authority—status—that the military uniform seems to grant. This is most evident in modern political campaigns, where different parties and candidates fight bitterly to try to use the esteem of military uniforms to provide a political boost. This often occurs almost regardless of the politics of the specific servicemember who has been recruited to lend their image to a campaign. For an in-depth treatment of this and other related phenomena, see Peter M. Erickson, “Inescapable: Polarization, Prestige, and the US Military in Politics” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2022).

⁸⁰ Christel Coton, “The Struggle for Prestige Among Peers: Officers in the Army,” *Societes contemporaines* 72, no. 4 (November 2008): 15–35.

⁸¹ Frank Hoffman, “The Marine Mask of War,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 10 November 2011; and Thomas G. Mahnken, *United States Strategic Culture* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2006), 100–2.

Marine Corps has been less aggressive in this effort, approving the wear of multiple new branch insignia.⁸² Other U.S. Services approach this topic from the opposite direction, authorizing qualification badges, community insignia, and many other types of formal status identifiers for wear on formal and combat uniforms. This study does not intend to speculate on whether one approach is superior, although this can become particularly important for principal-agent dynamics, personnel management, and other issues that arise within hierarchies regarding command, leadership, and direction of subordinates (discussed briefly in chapter 9).

The previous paragraphs have made a case that servicemembers should be more likely than most to be highly focused on social status. Reputation is a closely linked concept, and it is particularly important in regard to status seeking. Indeed, maximizing status is the fundamental motivation for most members of the bureaucracy, reputation management is an unavoidable corollary to it. In his study of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, *Reputation and Power*, Daniel Carpenter describes how status is inextricably linked with organizational reputation; he writes, “perhaps more significant, an organizational reputation can embed individual level status and esteem within it.”⁸³ The linkage between organizational reputation and individual status is an important one; military readers will be familiar with the feedback loop generated by high-status individuals who are members of a unit that increases its reputation and provides high status back to the individual members of the unit. This is more pronounced in highly visible units found in every military Service. In the United States, this is most noticeable in the U.S. Army, although perhaps the best example might be found in the British or Canadian Armies’ regimental systems.⁸⁴ Units of this sort are well known both within and outside their parent Service, and the sheer act of belonging to them provides their members some amount of increased status.

Reputation is an important personal trait as well. In many ways, it can

⁸² The Marine Corps now recognizes multiple branches within the aviation arm of the Service as well as members of Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC), explosive ordnance disposal Marines, and it maintains several qualification badges that serve as de facto branch signifiers.

⁸³ Carpenter, *Reputation and Power*, 57.

⁸⁴ Many units within the U.S. military are well known to the general public and confer some amount of status on their members. These are often formations with storied histories such as the 101st Airborne Division, 82d Airborne Division, or XVIII Airborne Corps, or Service branches that have reputations for being “elite” like the Green Berets or Navy SEALs.

seem indistinguishable from status. However, it includes a dimension of past action; it is “a matter of performance and track records, whereas status can be preserved without such evidence of extraordinary, or at least above-normal performances.”⁸⁵ One might differentiate the two by saying that status represents how important people think you are, while reputation represents how good they think you are. Status can be easy to accrue, whereas it can be very difficult to gain a good reputation but far easier to earn a bad name. Indeed, “earning a bad name is easy, because negative behaviors are generally perceived as more diagnostic than positive ones.”⁸⁶ Status is most often something individuals will attempt to maximize, whereas reputation is instead something that one might seek to manage and protect among multiple audiences.⁸⁷ Military members do both. Morris Janowitz describes how an officer who “wanted to rise had to establish a reputation.” In this view, a reputation for what one has done in the military is essential if they desire to continue to accrue status, as it influences promotion, patronage, and assignments. As Janowitz describes, “the military profession is today engaged in a continuous process of informally rating their superiors, peers, and subordinates.”⁸⁸ Although Janowitz wrote many years ago, this dynamic is one that continues into the present.

It generally stands to reason that military members would be status and reputation seeking. Status and reputation are likely to be a particularly useful form of professional currency. The unique nature of the military business makes it different than many other bureaucracies, both public and private. First, as discussed above, it is governed by strict laws that prevent significant monetary gain. Second, power accrual is difficult beyond the confines of the rank structure; because military leaders rotate from unit to unit every few years, it is very difficult to accrue personal power in a specific location, although one can continue to accrue power commensurate with the mili-

⁸⁵ Alexander Styhre, *Status and Organizations: Theories and Cases* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 13, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09868-0>.

⁸⁶ Nicoletta Cavazza, Margherita Guidetti, and Stefano Pagliaro, “Who Cares for Reputation?: Individual Differences and Concern for Reputation,” *Current Psychology* 34, no. 1 (March 2015): 164–76, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-014-9249-y>.

⁸⁷ Carpenter, *Reputation and Power*, 58–59.

⁸⁸ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 145.

tary's formal identifier of social status: rank.⁸⁹ Finally, given the stated ethos of many militaries to be ready to "fight tonight," professional reputation and status provides a useful "shorthand" for servicemembers who often expect to rotate between units and duties frequently. If they have a well-known reputation or social status, it is less necessary to spend time and effort developing them after arrival to a new social environment, and thus eliminates long(er) periods of "feeling out" that often occur when new social groups form. This is exactly the dynamic Janowitz describes in *The Professional Soldier*.⁹⁰

Thus, as discussed previously, military servicemembers are hypersensitive to status differences and consequently manage their status and reputation both intentionally and unconsciously. When they act in their own self-interest, as public choice theory tells us they will, it will most often be to maximize status and reputation. This is not to make a normative claim; as a perceptive analysis of military culture stated in 2008, "organizational cultures are not good or bad, right or wrong; rather they are either aligned or misaligned with the organization's environment."⁹¹ This book does not seek to delve into specific organizational environments, but it does claim that the particular organizational culture of Western militaries lends itself to status maximization as servicemembers' primary goal. As Stephen J. Gerras, Leonard Wong, and Charles D. Allen wrote in the analysis referenced above, this is neither good nor bad, but it is important to understand how the proclivities of a specific culture might interact with a given environment (discussed in chapter 9). First, however, we will turn to a deeper discussion of social status and reputation management in the next chapter.

⁸⁹ In the broader political science literature, the practice of frequently rotating commanders is usually considered a part of a strategy known as coup-proofing. In this context, it is assumed to take place explicitly to limit the power of military leaders. This is not to suggest this is why the United States or other Western militaries frequently rotate military leaders, but the end result is often essentially the same. See Jun Koga Sudduth, "Coup Risk, Coup-Proofing and Leader Survival," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 1 (2017): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316676885>.

⁹⁰ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 146–49.

⁹¹ Gerras, Wong, and Allen, "Organizational Culture."

Chapter 4

The Science of Status and Reputation

Apart from economic payoffs, social status (social rank) seems to be the most important incentive and motivating force of social behavior.

~ Nobel laureate John Harsanyi¹

While war is a psychological act, humans are not rational beings; rather, they are emotional beings. Hence the guiding structures of war are emotional—concerning pride, and belonging, and status, and jealousy, and fear—about which we try to think logically in order to prevail. War is both an art and a science.

~ Mike Martin²

In military circles, the novel *Once an Eagle* has been famous for decades.³ It was written by Anton Myrer, a World War II veteran, and after his death his widow donated the publishing rights for the book to the U.S. Army War Col-

¹ John C. Harsanyi, “A Bargaining Model for Social Status in Informal Groups and Formal Organizations,” in *Essays on Ethics, Social Behavior, and Scientific Explanation* (Dordrecht, Holland: Springer, 1976), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-9327-9_11.

² Mike Martin, *How to Fight a War* (London: Hurst, 2023), 6.

³ Anton Myrer, *Once an Eagle* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968). Although some might question the relevance of a novel from the 1960s, it is notable that this book remained required reading within much of the U.S. military through the early 2010s. For example, *Once an Eagle* was required reading for Marines through 2013. This means that, at a minimum, we should expect Marines with more than 10 years of service to have read and thought about this book. Other Services—and the units within them—have maintained similar reading lists, some of which still include this book. See “Research Guides: CMC Professional Reading Program 2020: Archives,” Library of the Marine Corps, accessed 18 November 2024.

lege.⁴ Myrer wrote it during the Vietnam War, and it includes many themes that might seem foreign to modern readers. However, the novel gained many devotees at the highest echelons of military leadership in the late 1990s and early 2000s, most likely for the simplistic and obvious dichotomy it draws between a conniving, social-climbing staff officer named Courtney Massengale and the self-sacrificing, honorable commander named Sam Damon.⁵ For example, General Charles C. Krulak, 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, wrote that “*Once an Eagle* has more to teach about leadership—whether it is in the boardroom or on the battlefield—than a score of modern-day management texts. It is a primer that lays out, through the lives of its two main characters, lessons on how and how not to lead.”⁶ As one might imagine, military leaders prefer to view themselves as the humble, honorable, tactically sound, and caring Damon. Since the height of its popularity, however, there has been a backlash against the book within the U.S. military, with detractors highlighting the false dichotomy between Damon and Massengale, specific flaws in the characters, and the framing of “commander versus staff officer.”⁷

Regardless of its utility as a model for military leaders or other themes such as social class or civil-military relations, there is a far more important point that *Once an Eagle* obscures due to its dichotomous framing. In a very real sense, *everyone* in the military is a version of the social climbing Courtney Massengale, just as nearly every servicemember also demonstrates many of the self-sacrificing and noble traits of his foil. While the Massengale character’s obvious and apparently mendacious efforts to rise in rank *feel* wrong to anyone educated in the basic ideas of leadership that most Western militaries hold dear (there is much evidence that *obvious* status striving is discouraged in many cultures to include militaries), the critical point this chapter will make clear is that humans do this sort of climbing all the time; some simply hide

⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 337–38.

⁵ Myrer, *Once an Eagle*. For its popularity in the U.S. military, see Elizabeth Becker, “Military Goes by the Book, but It’s a Novel,” *New York Times*, 16 August 1999.

⁶ Quoted in Robert Stone, “Battle Hymn of the Republic: Review of *Once an Eagle* by Anton Myrer,” *New York Review of Books*, 5 October 2000.

⁷ For examples, see Darrell Fawley III, “It’s Time to Retire Sam Damon,” Modern War Institute, 20 August 2020; Christopher Wilson, “Once an Eagle: Idol or Idle?,” Center for Junior Officers, 6 May 2020; and Thomas E. Ricks and MajGen Robert Scales, USA (Ret), “O! The Damage ‘Once an Eagle’ Has Done to My Army—and Yes, It Is Partly My Fault,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), 18 December 2013.

or rationalize it better than others.⁸ It is not aberrant or unnatural behavior; instead, it is exactly what people have evolved to do. This is compounded within the military by selection effects, structural pressures, and legal and cultural limitations that were discussed in the previous chapter. Although this discussion may seem to the reader to be an effort to impugn the motives of military leaders or other personnel, the point is exactly the opposite. As previously mentioned, servicemembers have unique predilections, incentives, and structural pressures that predispose them *all* to some degree of Courtney Massengale-like behavior; this is not to be denigrated, but is instead to be recognized, understood, and managed.

What is status? What is reputation? Why are they important? There are several answers to these questions, all equally valid. In the general context of psychology, sociology, cognitive neuroscience, and organizational studies (broadly defined), among others, it is important because, in the words of one recent book on social status, “a growing body of empirical research concludes that status is a fundamental human desire.”⁹ Reputation provides a similar foundation for human social interaction, with some psychologists claiming that “reputation is what makes us human.”¹⁰ These two concepts are often conflated and sometimes difficult to disentangle.¹¹ Indeed, in different places in the literature, status might be considered an outcome of reputation, while in others reputation is claimed to be an outcome of high status. In others still, they are described with essentially the same definition, and in many others the terms are replaced with synonyms such as *prestige*. Finally, there is also a large amount of leadership research that seeks to describe and measure *respect*, which in this book’s framing is a clear component of both

⁸ W. David Marx writes convincingly that while humans constantly seek status, doing so openly and with obvious intent to gain it is a “taboo.” He provides evidence to support the idea that all humans are natural and automatic status maximizers. Those who are most effective at accruing status are those who are best at hiding or rationalizing their status climbing activity from those around them and from themselves. See W. David Marx, *Status and Culture: How Our Desire for Social Rank Creates Taste, Identity, Art, Fashion, and Constant Change* (New York: Viking, 2022), 69–91, xvi.

⁹ Marx, *Status and Culture*, 7.

¹⁰ Gloria Origgi, *Reputation: What It Is and Why It Matters*, trans. Stephen Holmes and Noga Arikha (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 23, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400888597>.

¹¹ Karen D. W. Patterson, “It Does Matter How You Get to the Top: Differentiating Status from Reputation,” *Administrative Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2014): 73–86, <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci4020073>.

status and reputation, although not necessarily a stand-alone element.¹² This chapter will discuss the two topics—status and reputation—with as much precision as possible, though given the lack of agreed on definitions the reader should expect some difficulty in disentangling the two. Despite the difficulty in achieving a measure of clarity, it is clear that these two related topics are significant from the individual to organizational level. That alone makes this an important subject; in the last half-century, social scientists have recognized that understanding social relationships and their structure among humans requires a knowledge and understanding of reputation and social status, where and from whom they come from, and how they shape our social hierarchies.

These topics are also critically important in the context of this volume because as discussed in chapter 3, status and reputation are more fundamental motivators for members of the military bureaucracy than for those who serve in other bureaucratic positions within the U.S. government or civilian sectors. If we seek to explain the motivations and actions of individuals within the military, status and reputation are essential concepts to understand. Using a public choice perspective, we assume that most actions taken by members of the bureaucracy are self-interested. Because members of the military are hypersensitive to status and reputation dynamics and limited in their ability to increase other motivating factors (e.g., power or money), they act to maximize these things. This informs a theory of military decision making that gives far less credit to the macroeconomic style ideas of top-down rational choice that generally shape military organizational and decision-making theories. Instead, activity within the military bureaucracy is shaped by individual self-interested action that leads to negotiation, compromise, and trade-offs at all levels of the hierarchy. Each individual primarily focuses on their own social status and reputation and that of their preferred organization. This maximizing activity can often happen without conscious intent or understanding.

Last, unlike many other theories of military or bureaucratic decisions, social status maximization and reputation management are concepts that apply at scale. Individuals maximize status and reputation at all echelons of the hierarchy, from the newly enlisted airman at the bottom of the pyramid to the highest-ranking four-star admiral. Small organizations (e.g., units) max-

¹² Michael R. Holmes Jr. et al., “Building Cross-Disciplinary Bridges in Leadership: Integrating Top Executive Personality and Leadership Theory and Research,” *Leadership Quarterly Yearly Review (LQYR) for 2021* 32, no. 1 (February 2021): 101490, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2020.101490>.

imize their own organizational status and reputation, often competing with each other. Large organizations (e.g., Services), seek to maximize their much broader understanding of status and reputation, competing for prestige, esteem, and tangible rewards. At every echelon, individual and tribal status maximization and reputation management happens constantly. To understand why the military acts as it does—how decisions are made from the highest grand strategic to the lowest micro tactical echelons—we must first discuss the fundamentals behind these drives.

What Is Status?

Before applying the concept of status maximizing to the military it is important to explain the concept in more depth. This is significantly more difficult than one might hope; status is a notoriously difficult concept to define, and it is often used differently depending on specific discipline, research, or focus. Researchers who have written about status tend to concentrate in two different areas—organizational and individual status—and often have difficulty applying their concepts consistently across these two different framings.¹³ Nonetheless, most people have experience thinking about the idea of social status; it is a fundamental concept for human social organization. Many might struggle to apply a strict definition, yet would easily apply Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s standard of “I know it when I see it.”¹⁴

Perhaps the most useful definition of status comes from researcher Cecilia L. Ridgeway, who writes that “status is a comparative social ranking of people, groups, or objects in terms of the social esteem, honor, and respect accorded to them.”¹⁵ A more parsimonious version of this is simply that “status refers to position or standing with reference to a particular group or society.”¹⁶

Both definitions provide a useful grounding for understanding decisions and activities within the military bureaucracy. As discussed in chapter 3,

¹³ Jone L. Pearce, “Introduction: The Power of Status,” in *Status in Management and Organizations*, ed. Jone L. Pearce (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Although the concurring opinion in which this was written, *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964), was clearly not a case regarding status or reputation or any other significant concept in this paper, Potter Stewart’s standard for recognizing obscenity remains a useful concept for determining whether something fits within a category most reasonable people would recognize.

¹⁵ Cecilia L. Ridgeway, *Status: Why Is It Everywhere? Why Does It Matter?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2019), 10.

¹⁶ Pearce, “Introduction: The Power of Status,” 6.

members of the military seek to maximize this social concept.¹⁷ What that means in practice can be difficult to establish however. There is a fairly simple interpretation of status maximization that would assume this means members of the military seek to climb the bureaucratic hierarchy. Although this fits the definitions above, it is insufficient. Indeed, that reading would also work for maximizing power, or authority, or many other possible motivations. Instead, the approach here submits that status is unique as a motivator for military personnel for all the reasons described in the previous chapter. It is also a necessary precondition for maximizing any other motivation in the military, whether those described earlier by Anthony Downs or some other motivating factor. In short, rank and prestige/reputation and power are almost impossibly entangled within Western military structures. Status must come first, and the rest generally follows. Before addressing this entanglement though, we will discuss the basics of status-seeking.

Individual Status

As the concept of social status moved outside the pure social sciences and instead became a topic of interest for evolutionary biologists, neuroscientists, and other cognitive science disciplines in the latter half of the twentieth century, it became apparent that it is something more than just a general social construct. Although social construction surely has much influence on how different hierarchies manifest and how humans act within them, it has nonetheless become increasingly clear that status-seeking is a basic, evolved, human endeavor. Status hierarchies exist in every human society and “almost every group-living species demonstrates a natural tendency to organize into a social hierarchy.”¹⁸ As one study described, “the prevalence of hierarchies and their similarities across species suggest an innate preference, or utility, in the differentiation of power and a possible evolutionary origin.”¹⁹ Because of this innate preference, it also appears that all humans have hardwired status-

¹⁷ One of the most difficult issues with the concept of status and also reputation, as we will soon see, is that it is extremely difficult to categorize and thus quantify. How do you know how much of it you have? If you are a status maximizer, when do you stop? Is there ever enough? How might you know? We will touch on this in later sections, but it remains a problem, at best.

¹⁸ Jessica E. Koski, Hongling Xie, and Ingrid R. Olson, “Understanding Social Hierarchies: The Neural and Psychological Foundations of Status Perception,” *Social Neuroscience* 10, no. 5 (2015): 527–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2015.1013223>.

¹⁹ Koski, Xie, and Olson, “Understanding Social Hierarchies.”

detection capabilities. Within milliseconds of encountering another human, we unconsciously assess their relative status and interpret specific indicators to assign them a place in our perceived social hierarchy. Individual status symbols and how we interpret them are often contextual to a particular culture—although sometimes not, as discussed later—but the basic act of assessing status is a basic, unconscious, and immediate human activity.²⁰

This sort of assessment is automatic. Every member of every culture interprets status cues and mentally assigns relative status interpretations to other individuals without thinking; one influential social psychology framing describes this as hierometer theory.²¹ People execute a very similar process when they assess groups, interpreting the status of a group using cultural and social cues to unconsciously decide where it should fit in their personal interpretation of the status hierarchy. As one author writes, “society is not to be understood in terms of a simple hierarchy, but as a continual struggle over the hierarchy of hierarchies.”²² Two important points arise here. First, essentially everyone belongs to multiple hierarchies, and hierarchies within hierarchies. How and why complex human social structures evolved is still not well understood, and it is likely that biological evolution has not kept up with cultural evolution, which has developed in extraordinary ways within the last several thousand years.²³ Regardless, humans continue to live in and belong to many different social groups that sometimes interact and sometimes do not. This is important because different people may prioritize their hierarchies in different ways. For example, it is entirely possible for one soldier to prioritize their own personal status and for a second to prioritize the status of their battalion and *yet both are still status maximizing*; in reality, it is likely that both soldiers will maximize status as much as possible in both areas while assigning different levels of importance to each based on their individ-

²⁰ Will Storr, *The Status Game: On Social Position and How We Use It* (London: William Collins, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2021), 23–30.

²¹ Nikhila Mahadevan, Aiden P. Gregg, and Constantine Sedikides, “Daily Fluctuations in Social Status, Self-Esteem, and Clinically Relevant Emotions: Testing Hierometer Theory and Social Rank Theory at a Within-Person Level,” *Journal of Personality* 91, no. 2 (2023): 519–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12752>.

²² Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 152.

²³ With the advent of the internet and social media, it appears that human social structures are entering a new period of change. Many have speculated that current societal problems (real or perceived) are a result of the fact that human evolution cannot keep pace with this rapid technological and societal change.

ual preferences and thought processes. Additionally, as these soldiers likely belong to other unique hierarchies within and outside their regular duties, if status attainment within the formal hierarchies they belong to is difficult or impossible, they may instead seek informal or alternative routes for status maximization such as rising within a club, becoming excellent at video games, or seeking to develop a sort of informal status within their existing formal hierarchy.²⁴

Second, formal hierarchies are far from the only status structures humans belong to. Each of us belongs to multiple informal hierarchies, where we interpret and assess individual status that may not have any relationship to formal status.²⁵ An example of this might be a young Marine attributing far more status to their squad leader than the battalion commander, despite enormous formal differences in rank and concomitant power between the two.²⁶ Interestingly, this may be somewhat related to the ability of humans to manage direct relationships with and take part in hierarchies with discrete numbers of other people. The shorthand term for this research is often known as *Dunbar's number*, based on the research of British anthropologist and psychologist Robin Dunbar. It suggests that humans are only capable of fully assessing and managing approximately 150 relationships with other people, although there is much debate about this idea.²⁷ An even more interesting example of informal status might be that of an airman who ignores their supervisor's instructions for fixing an engine and more readily follows the direction of a peer who they believe to be a top-notch mechanic. In the airman's mind,

²⁴ W. David Marx provides a book length treatment of this process using a cultural lens in *Status and Culture*.

²⁵ Maurits C. de Klepper et al., "Sociometric Status and Peer Control Attempts: A Multiple Status Hierarchies Approach," *Journal of Management Studies* 54, no. 1 (2017): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12242>; and Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997), 197–99.

²⁶ Cybernetic management theorist Stafford Beer approached this phenomenon from a different perspective, attributing it to limitations in organizational systems and human cognition. For his discussion of this see Stafford Beer, *Brain of the Firm* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), 57–64.

²⁷ This concept remains hotly debated. For example, see Patrik Lindenfors, Andreas Warfel, and Johan Lind, "'Dunbar's Number' Deconstructed," *Biology Letters* 17, no. 5 (2021): 20210158, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2021.0158>; Barry Wellman, "Is Dunbar's Number Up?," *British Journal of Psychology* 103, no. 2 (2012): 174–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.2011.02075.x>; and A. G. Sutcliffe, R. I. M. Dunbar, and D. Wang, "Modelling the Evolution of Social Structure," *PLoS ONE* 11, no. 7 (July 2016): e0158605, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0158605>.

the peer has a higher status as a mechanic whether earned or not. Regardless of the reason—whether it is due to the limitations of human cognition and mental understanding of groups or more direct interpretation of status as it matters in a specific context—it is correct to say that many individuals who do not have direct formal authority nonetheless accrue significant status within informal networks and may often receive higher deference than those with nominal, formal status.²⁸

Given these multiple status hierarchies and the inherent human drive to belong and accrue status within them, assessing and interpreting status is not the only process that is both neurologically and culturally hardwired into the human condition. It is just a first step. The next element of social status that is common to all human societies is the concept discussed previously: status maximization. All humans seek to maximize their own status as best they can within the rules and limits set by the specific hierarchies they belong to or as described above, if seeking *informal* status, occasionally deliberately in violation of the rules and limits set by a hierarchy. There are different strategies, both conscious and unconscious, that humans apply in this status competition, but accruing as much status as possible within a specific group or hierarchy is a basic human need that is common to all of us.²⁹

Why is this the case? As already alluded to, status within hierarchies is positively associated with several possible human motivations: power, freedom of action, and the ability to accrue various resources. Chapter 9 will discuss how it is also associated with health outcomes, cognition, and several other issues the military should be concerned about. At its most elementary, however, status is a fundamental drive for humans (and almost all group-living animals) because “across the animal kingdom, individuals and groups who are high in social status are more likely to receive preferential access to or quantity of resources, compared to those who are low in social status.”³⁰ Importantly, status may also refer to both situational or dispositional attributes or activities; for example, just because an individual is predisposed toward status-seeking by some combination of personality traits, if the situation does not support a particular type of status-seeking behavior it would be unlikely

²⁸ Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 197–99.

²⁹ Marx, *Status and Culture*, 22–23.

³⁰ Narun Pornpattananangkuk, Caroline F. Zink, and Joan Y. Chiao, “Neural Basis of Social Status Hierarchy,” in *The Psychology of Social Status*, ed. Joey T. Cheng, Jessica L. Tracy, and Cameron Anderson (New York: Springer, 2014), 303, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-0867-7>.

to occur. If an individual persisted in using a technique or behavior that did not align with the hierarchical structure or system, it would be unlikely to work and might even have negative status or reputational effects.³¹ This is an important point that will be covered in chapter 9, as it suggests that it should be possible to design a system to minimize—or at least mitigate—status-seeking behavior that did not align with organizational preferences and/or limit the amount of such behavior by intentionally selecting those who have particular attributes for promotion, leadership positions, or continued service. Nonetheless, there are multiple ways status manifests, and within a hierarchy that prioritizes status over essentially any other attribute, we should expect to see all of them contingent on specific circumstances.

Some humans seek status more aggressively than others. As the previous paragraph mentioned, there is significant research regarding personality traits and how they associate with different levels of status-seeking; although all people generally seek to maximize their personal and in-group status, diverse personalities will approach it differently and there is some evidence that specific personality traits are more likely to rise in various types of hierarchies.³² Circumstances matter as well. When individuals are placed into roles associated with status levels, there are significant variations in multiple neural indicators: hormones, activity in different regions of the brain, and the actions they take.³³ Critical points for the military that we have already discussed are first that there is at least some evidence of a correlation between specific personality traits and those who seek entry into the military. These are then *increased* by the military environment (e.g., disagreeableness, narcissism, etc.) in a type of positive feedback loop. These same personality traits are briefly

³¹ Pornpattananangkuk, Zink, and Chiao, “Neural Basis of Social Status Hierarchy,” 303.

³² There is a great deal of research on this general topic. For several examples, see Cameron Anderson and Joe Cowan, “Personality and Status Attainment: A Micropolitics Perspective,” in *The Psychology of Social Status*; Cameron Anderson and Gavin J. Kilduff, “The Pursuit of Status in Social Groups,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society* 18, no. 5 (2009): 295–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01655.x>; Michael C. Ashton et al., “Status-Driven Risk Taking and the Major Dimensions of Personality,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 44, no. 6 (December 2010): 734–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2010.09.003>; and Anton Aluja et al., “Dark Triad Traits, Social Position, and Personality: A Cross-Cultural Study,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 53, nos. 3–4 (April 2022): 380–402, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002202212111072816>. For a slightly different perspective that ultimately agrees that personality traits likely affect status-seeking, see Rebecca Neel et al., “Individual Differences in Fundamental Social Motives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110, no. 6 (June 2016): 887–907, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000068>.

³³ Pornpattananangkuk, Zink, and Chiao, “Neural Basis of Social Status Hierarchy,” 319.

discussed in chapter 3, and they are positively correlated with status-seeking behavior.³⁴ Each individual's specific circumstances might then add to or suppress these traits, and it can be exceptionally difficult to predict exactly how this interaction will fully play out.

Second, the structure of the military hierarchy prioritizes status seeking over other types of bureaucratic motivation. To restate this more simply: some people are more likely to seek status than others. Those personality types (and other indicators discussed later) are overrepresented in the military environment; additionally, the military environment rewards status-seeking behavior more than most other motivating factors due to its unique structure and incentives. Third, the very existence of the military rank structure with its visible, constant status indicators may be responsible for a number of physiological and psychological effects such as changing individuals' hormone reactions, how they act in different scenarios, and decisions they make, particularly about and with actors who are lower in formal military status (rank).³⁵

There is not only one pathway to seek and accrue social status however. There are several ways one might accrue status, and a person's specific environment, personality, history (much like reputation, discussed in the next section), or even personal physical attributes will interact with each other to encourage the use of different methods for any one individual. First, status can either come from earning it (status-seeking/accrual), or it can be given to a person due to factors beyond their explicit control. These two categories are often referred to as either *earned* or *ascribed* status. Hierarchies built around less-developed social structures than those found in the modern world often lean—and have historically leaned—toward the latter, whether feudal systems in medieval Europe, strictly structured class systems like the Indian caste system, or more simple hereditary systems that might still be found throughout the world in less-developed societies (interestingly, these hierarchies form

³⁴ Joshua J. Jackson et al., "Military Training and Personality Trait Development: Does the Military Make the Man, or Does the Man Make the Military?," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 3 (2012): 270–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611423545>.

³⁵ Benjamin Siart, Lena S. Pflüger, and Bernard Wallner, "Pulling Rank: Military Rank Affects Hormone Levels and Fairness in an Allocation Experiment," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016): 1750, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01750>.

the basic foundation for Western military structures).³⁶ Importantly, many ascribed status traits manifest unconsciously; much research has been done on how race, heredity, gender, or other basic physical traits might manifest in individual status.³⁷ We will return to this topic later.

Beyond having ascribed status that comes from no action of one's own, however, a person might also earn status as they move up in the hierarchy either from seniority, competence (perceived or demonstrated), or more likely a mix of the two. In reality, these factors are usually inextricable, as people usually have some mix of ascribed status and earned status. Removing ascribed status from the equation, there are two general ways most experts break apart status-seeking, or the *earned* part of this equation: First, a person might earn status using *dominance*. Second, a person can accrue status using *prestige*. Some recent work has also broken out a third category of status-seeking: *virtue*.³⁸ This book will focus primarily on the first two of these categories, although it will discuss virtue briefly as well. *Dominance* refers to “the use of force and intimidation to induce fear,” and *prestige* refers to “the sharing of expertise or know-how to gain respect.”³⁹ Using virtue to accrue status applies when it is “awarded to players who are conspicuously dutiful, obedient, and moralistic.”⁴⁰ Importantly, these methods for accruing status are believed to have evolved separately and for different reasons; what this implies is that humans can and often do employ them selectively (albeit often unconsciously) depending on a given situation or culture, and it is not uncommon for both dominance and prestige strategies to exist simultaneously in an individual

³⁶ Marx, *Status and Culture*, 15. For discussions of hereditary status in European militaries, see Michael Howard, *War in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Gwynne Dyer, *War* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, an imprint of Random House, 1985), 132–33.

³⁷ Joseph Berger, Susan J. Rosenholtz, and Morris Zelditch, “Status Organizing Processes,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 6 (1980): 479–508, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.06.080180.002403>.

³⁸ For a discussion of evidence supporting the dominance-prestige account of status differentiation, see Joey T. Cheng and Jessica L. Tracy, “Toward a Unified Science of Hierarchy: Dominance and Prestige Are Two Fundamental Pathways to Human Social Rank,” in *The Psychology of Social Status*, 3–27. For virtue, see Storr, *The Status Game*, 39. Of note, Storr essentially breaks the broadly recognized prestige category into two separate ones: success and virtue. This chapter will discuss both to some degree, as the distinction is somewhat useful for parsing different types of status seeking/accrual within the military context.

³⁹ Joey T. Cheng et al., “Two Ways to the Top: Evidence that Dominance and Prestige Are Distinct Yet Viable Avenues to Social Rank and Influence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 1 (January 2013): 103–25, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030398>.

⁴⁰ Storr, *The Status Game*, 39.

person or group.⁴¹ A related implication is that some people may employ the wrong pathway for a given context, leading to a loss of status instead of accruing it. An example of this sort of “misfire” might be found in the modern epithet: read the room.

Virtue strategies are best understood as a subset of prestige. Many psychologists separate the ideas of dominance and prestige by how others confer status to an actor: if the status gain is coerced through fear (either psychological or physical), then the status receiver is employing a dominance strategy. If status is freely given or conferred, then the status receiver is instead employing a prestige strategy. As the definition of virtue shows, it fits within the broad rubric of prestige strategies, but it is useful to note that this particular dimension is at least moderately counterintuitive. Most readers would think of status maximization as selfish, internally focused actions. However, if they were applying a strategy of virtue to gain status, “other-focused” activities such as those Anthony Downs described in his bureaucratic motivations (see chapter 3) would also be status maximizing. Phrased differently, one way to accrue prestige-based status is for a person to show the group that they are willing and able to do things to support the group with no expectation of direct or immediate reward.

Curiously, some evidence also suggests that virtue-based status-seeking may enable individuals to accrue status even if they are demonstrably incompetent or ineffective. It may be a way some actors can “short circuit” the traditional methods of accruing status through either demonstrating competence and ability to help the group or demonstrating pure dominance.⁴² Notably, although culture obviously interacts with and shapes how each of the mechanisms manifest, virtue is probably the most socially constructed of each of these. It, too, is far from only a modern concept though. It can be found in the concept of *noblesse oblige* that was (and remains) common in much of the world.⁴³ For example, in the modern world a person might accrue virtue by donating time or money to various charities like a philanthro-

⁴¹ Cheng et al., “Two Ways to the Top.”

⁴² Feng Bai, Grace Ching Chi Ho, and Jin Yan, “Does Virtue Lead to Status?: Testing the Moral Virtue Theory of Status Attainment,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 118, no. 3 (March 2020): 501–31, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000192>.

⁴³ For an in-depth discussion of the idea of *noblesse oblige* and the (sometimes counterintuitive) way it emerges in societies, see Leigh Plunkett Tost, Kimberly A. Wade-Benzoni, Hana Huang Johnson, “Noblesse Oblige Emerges (with Time): Power Enhances Intergenerational Beneficence,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 128, no. 1 (May 2015): 61–73.

pist such as Bill Gates. In a different culture or time, however, this might be seen as pure stupidity and instead the culture might interpret virtue as movie character Gordon Gekko did, famously saying in the movie *Wall Street* that “greed is good.”⁴⁴ For a more problematic example, U.S. military forces had consistent difficulties with this theme, as they sought to institute merit-based advancement systems within the democratic governments imposed on Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s. The culture of both countries prized helping family relations as virtuous, and thus Western-style antinepotism laws were not only difficult to implement, but they were also counterproductive in many ways. A virtue strategy can obviously manifest within military organizations as well; consider a military officer who is generally bad at their occupational specialty or other job requirements, and yet consistently volunteers for additional duty or works overtime to support their peers and seniors. It would not be unusual for this individual to accrue some degree of social status, even despite the fact that they are generally bad at their job.

Each of the status accrual mechanisms described above has different effects on those around them and the environment or structure of the hierarchy within which they are used. Indeed, they can create a feedback loop where use of one particular status-seeking method creates an environment where everyone else nearby is incentivized or even encouraged to use a similar method. For example, a military leader who was more socialized to or preferred dominance methods might be more likely to try to achieve status by exhibiting dominance, whereas one who employed prestige or virtue might be more likely to focus on helping individuals, the unit, or organization. It follows that the environment this leader creates from their personal behavioral proclivities could also influence the general culture over which they have influence, and thus make it more likely for their subordinates to exhibit either dominance or prestige strategies. A very simple version of this could be a commander who tells their subordinates that they are not hard or tough enough on their people. After this, when they are nearby, each of their subordinate leaders acts more aggressively with their subordinates in posture, direct interaction, and general environment. As expected, this could easily create a cascading effect of prioritizing dominance strategies down the hierarchy. World War I

⁴⁴ Interestingly, this statement was influenced and based on a commencement address given by Ivan F. Boesky, a notorious stock trader known for insider trading, for the Berkeley School of Business at the University of California in May 1986. *Wall Street*, directed by Oliver Stone, starring Michael Douglas, Charlie Sheen, Darryl Hannah, and Martin Sheen (Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 1987).

Marshal of Italy Luigi Cadorna provides an example of real-world effects of this sort of dominance prioritization. Cadorna wrote in-depth about the need for discipline and how “indiscipline was an ancient evil.”⁴⁵ As historian David Stevenson describes, “Cadorna believed—probably unjustly—that only the harshest discipline would keep his troops fighting. He terrorized his generals with the aim that they should do the same to their subordinates.”⁴⁶ Some historians have even alleged that Cadorna reinstituted the Roman practice of decimation for units that did not perform to his preferred standard.⁴⁷

A less simple, but perhaps more important example, is that of military recruit training. In the words of historian Allan R. Millett, military recruit training serves as “the primary agent of institutional socialization.”⁴⁸ Much recruit training uses dominance as its first and most common status indicator.⁴⁹ The instructors at the various military Services’ entry-level training experiences employ this strategy deliberately and very effectively, showing recruits who is the dominant, high status member of their organization from the moment they arrive to recruit training (obviously the instructor).⁵⁰ Primates, and humans in particular, learn through observing and copying, although they do not just copy each other without some strategy. Humans focus on copying high status individuals far more than others; thus, it may be that by exposing recruits to this dominance behavior that obviously works, we inadvertently socialize all members of the military into employing this behavior as a prima-

⁴⁵ Luigi Cadorna, *La Guerra alla fronte Italiana, fino all’arresto sulla linea della Piave e del Grappa* (24 Maggio 1915–9 Novembre 1917), vol. 1 (Milan: Treves, 1921), 25–29.

⁴⁶ David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 174.

⁴⁷ David Gilmour, *The Pursuit of Italy: A History of a Land, Its Regions, and Their Peoples* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 288.

⁴⁸ Allan R. Millett, “The U.S. Marine Corps, 1973–2017,” in *The Culture of Military Organizations*, ed. Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 392, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108622752.017>.

⁴⁹ For an in-depth discussion of what is known as the “shock treatment” in military basic training, see Morris Janowitz, *Sociology and the Military Establishment* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1965), 62–64.

⁵⁰ See Thomas E. Ricks, *Making the Corps: 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Scribner, 2007).

ry status-maximizing strategy and thus their preferred leadership technique.⁵¹ Indeed, there is much evidence to support the concept that military recruits treat their instructors at initial combat training as role models; it is thus reasonable to assume they will seek to emulate the methods these instructors use to accrue and maintain their individual and organizational status.⁵²

When and how individuals use each of the different strategies for accruing status is extremely contextual. It depends on the characteristics of other individuals within a given group, the objectives sought by the group, personal proclivities, and a multitude of other factors. Humans employ each strategy to maximize their individual status gains, and in so doing, they shape the culture within which they seek to accrue status. As mentioned before, however, there are other factors that are probably much more difficult to change than culture; indeed, some of them may be a hardwired product of evolution, while others may merely be cultural artifacts that have shown themselves to be extremely resistant to change.

Many different factors play into status. As discussed, there are several different strategies humans employ to try to acquire more of it. However, some people are just lucky (or unlucky), and they have what we earlier referred to as *ascribed* status. Many things might combine to give an individual ascribed status. For example, it is an oft noticed and discussed fact that flag officers in the military tend to be taller than average height (as are many politicians and CEOs). People might imagine that there is no data to back this up, however, they would be mistaken. Extensive evidence shows that many immutable, inherited characteristics provide status advantages. Obvious characteristics such as height, race, gender, or the appearance of physical size all seem to affect

⁵¹ Steve Stewart-Williams, *The Ape that Understood the Universe: How the Mind and Culture Evolve* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 239, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108763516>; and John Whitfield, *People Will Talk: The Surprising Science of Reputation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011), 12–25. This is likely also the mechanism by which recruits become less agreeable (or more disagreeable) after joining the military and over time. See Jackson et al., “Military Training and Personality Trait Development.”

⁵² John H. Faris, “The Impact of Basic Combat Training: The Role of the Drill Sergeant,” in *The Social Psychology of Military Service*, ed. Nancy L. Goldman and David R. Segal (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976).

status differences.⁵³ Other more socially malleable standards provide advantages as well. Indeed, one extremely well documented fact is that physical attractiveness has a direct correlation with success, treatment under the law, and many other categories. This certainly *could* be because beauty is concomitant with intelligence, thoughtfulness, so-called “early bird-ness,” or some other characteristic. More likely, however, is that people ascribe greater status to the attractive and are more likely to confer earned status on them as well.⁵⁴ Less obvious physical traits such as facial dominance have also been shown to predict advancement and military rank.⁵⁵ In many such cases, it is likely that humans have evolved to make subconscious status judgments that correlate with traits such as higher testosterone production or other similar factors; as evolutionary psychologist Steve Stewart-Williams has described, “people seem to be especially attentive to evolutionarily relevant stimuli.”⁵⁶

There are many of these predictors that correlate with high status, yet they have very little association with earning status through prestige or explicit dominance. The relationship between having parents who served in the military and one’s subsequent military service is well documented. Going further, a 2017 study described how “the highest ranks of the military are saturated with families who have served for generations and have legacies

⁵³ See Nancy M. Blaker and Mark van Vugt, “The Status-Size Hypothesis: How Cues of Physical Size and Social Status Influence Each Other,” in *The Psychology of Social Status*; Cecilia L. Ridgeway, “Gender, Status, and Leadership,” *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001): 637–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00233>; Tim Gawley, Thomas Perks, and James Curtis, “Height, Gender, and Authority Status at Work: Analyses for a National Sample of Canadian Workers,” *Sex Roles* 60, no. 3 (February 2009): 208–22, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9520-5>; Tonya K. Frevert and Lisa Slattery Walker, “Physical Attractiveness and Social Status,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 3 (2014): 313–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12132>; and Anderson and Kilduff, “The Pursuit of Status in Social Groups.”

⁵⁴ Daniel S. Hamermesh, *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People Are More Successful* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Deborah L. Rhode, *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Galina Hale, Tali Regev, and Yona Rubinstein, “Do Looks Matter for an Academic Career in Economics?,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 215 (November 2023): 406–20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.09.022>.

⁵⁵ Ulrich Mueller and Allan Mazur, “Facial Dominance of West Point Cadets as a Predictor of Later Military Rank,” *Social Forces* 74, no. 3 (1996): 823–50, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/74.3.823>; and John Loehr and Robert B. O’Hara, “Facial Morphology Predicts Male Fitness and Rank but Not Survival in Second World War Finnish Soldiers,” *Biology Letters* 9, no. 4 (August 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2013.0049>.

⁵⁶ Stewart-Williams, *The Ape that Understood the Universe*, 239.

of multi-generational flag officers.”⁵⁷ It is reasonable to consider that the ascribed status of a servicemember from such a family might be higher than one without such name recognition. As Maureen Mylander wrote, “another way to establish a military reputation early is to be born with it.”⁵⁸ Although there is limited direct evidence to support this claim, much research has been conducted into the power of name recognition. In a military where the officers and senior enlisted who make up promotion boards often do not know the individuals they are screening for promotion, just the name recognition that comes along with having a senior leader as a parent could indeed have an important effect.⁵⁹ Importantly, this is not to claim that there is any evidence for nepotism in promotion selection, but other unconscious status assessments likely play some role in selecting individuals for promotion. The *Army Times* recently waded into this conversation with similar observations, finding “Army football alums make general more often than other officers.”⁶⁰ Many of the unconscious status associations that create disparities like this are probably unchangeable and almost certainly require more study in the military context. However, as we will discuss in chapter 9, there may be reasons to think we can and should be able to minimize their effects by consciously evaluating existing systems with status and reputational dynamics in mind.

Organizational Status

Until now, the discussion has focused on individual status dynamics, but these same dynamics play out at the organizational level at every echelon. Sociologists have long claimed that status is a concept that applies to organizations in much the same way it applies to individuals.⁶¹ This is not to suggest organizations should be seen in the anthropomorphic fashion described by

⁵⁷ Amy Schafer, *Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste and the All-Volunteer Force* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2017), 9.

⁵⁸ Maureen Mylander, *The Generals: Making It, Military-Style* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), 144.

⁵⁹ A. Mike Burton, Rob Jenkins, and David J. Robertson, “I Recognise Your Name but I Can’t Remember Your Face: An Advantage for Names in Recognition Memory,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 72, no. 7 (2019): 1847–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747021818813081>.

⁶⁰ Davis Winkie, “Army Football Alums Make General More Often than Other Officers—Why?,” *Army Times*, 8 December 2022.

⁶¹ Michael Sauder, Freda Lynn, and Joel M. Podolny, “Status: Insights from Organizational Sociology,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, no. 1 (2012): 267–83, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071811-145503>.

decision-making models in chapter 1 but instead recognizes that humans do often impute status to organizations beyond that associated with only their members. In general, individuals can increase their personal status by associating with a higher status organization and vice versa. Indeed, at times it might benefit an actor more to try to increase their organization's status than their personal status, particularly if they are personally identified with the organization.

In militaries, this most obviously applies to commanders, who often directly identify with the status of their organization. However, it has been long established that humans are tribal creatures; people divide the world into “us-them” relationships, often described as “in-group–out-group” distinctions in social science fields.⁶² Those relationships are easily shifted, and most humans can be induced to rapidly change the factors they use to define the parameters of “us” and “them.”⁶³ We should expect that members of the military hierarchy will identify with each of the different “tribes” they belong to and seek to increase the status of each of them whenever and however they are able to do so, depending on the social circumstances and specific environment within which they find themselves. Indeed, historian Peter Kindsvatter describes how “the level of command with which a soldier identified varied.”⁶⁴ To wit, members of a rifle squad typically seek to maximize the status of their squad. Members of a particular military Service seek to maximize the status of the Service (e.g., the longstanding Marine Corps–Army disputes, see chapter 7), and of course, members of the U.S. military often maximize their status as a part of the all-volunteer force.

Many of these tribes intersect and overlap, and members will maximize status as best they can as a part of each, though obviously limited by social context (when it is socially acceptable and expected to seek status for a particular organization), and personal ability to affect others' opinion of and deference toward an organization. As an example, a Marine lance corporal may not have the ability to accrue status for the Marine Corps in their daily life on a Marine base, and thus may not work particularly hard to or even think about the possibility of increasing the Service's organizational status. When they go home on leave, however, they will seek to accrue as much organizational

⁶² Alexander V. Shkurko, “Cognitive Mechanisms of Ingroup/Outgroup Distinction,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 45, no. 2 (2015): 188–213, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12063>.

⁶³ Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*, 387–424.

⁶⁴ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 134.

status to the Marine Corps as possible, perhaps by emphasizing specific traits or perceptions of the organization: they might try to make the Marines seem tougher, or better, more dominant, or more cerebral. Which of these status markers (or any other) they choose depends greatly on the social context and circumstance and the audience with whom they seek increased status. Emphasizing and seeking greater status for the Marine Corps in this context obviously is good for the Corps as a whole, but it takes place in the context of benefiting an individual personally—making the Corps look better increases their personal status as a member of the larger organization. This obviously redounds to their personal benefit as well as that of the Corps.

As mentioned above, much of the status maximizing activity humans undertake is unconscious. Humans pursue it without deliberative thought, and they generally seek to maximize both their individual status and that of their organization. This is not to suggest members of the bureaucracy do not make calculated decisions about how they might increase personal status or that of their tribe; they absolutely do. However, even when members of the military bureaucracy act without conscious thought, the culture they belong to, elements of their personality, and normal human behavior push them toward maximizing status in any manner possible. Many might disagree, and even claim that they personally would never act in such a way. Perhaps. More likely, however, is that the brain is very effective at deceiving itself, and there is ample research to suggest that even when people act deliberately personal motivations are not clear to ourselves. There is extensive evidence that people are often unable to articulate why they acted in a specific fashion, and that confabulation—motivated reasoning covered up by the brain's clever post-hoc explanations for its action—has a far greater effect than anyone would like to admit.⁶⁵ The evidence shows that humans maximize status, admittedly or not, and military members do it more than most. They also act in ways to develop, manage, and protect a second, related asset: reputation.

What Is Reputation?

Reputation closely resembles status in many ways. Like status, it falls square-

⁶⁵ See Robert Trivers, "The Elements of a Scientific Theory of Self Deception," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 907, no. 1 (2000): 114–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2000.tb06619.x>; Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 2004); and Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson, *The Elephant in the Brain: Hidden Motives in Everyday Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 73–89.

ly into the “I know it when I see it” rubric for many who think about and try to define it. This concept has been slower to permeate throughout the social sciences in the way status has; as one sociological study discussed, “the sociology of reputations is an emerging field of research, vast and still poorly structured.”⁶⁶ It is, however, being recognized as an important topic for sociology, organizational studies, and social psychology, among other fields. As the previously quoted study states, “reputation is now returning to center stage.”⁶⁷ It is a useful concept when paired with status, particularly as an asset people seek to manage and protect.

For the purposes of this book, reputation is almost a photographic negative of status. Status is someone’s position in a social hierarchy dependent on the subjective judgments of others. They make value judgments based on a multitude of factors (many described in the section above) and use these judgments to either confer or receive deference, depending on where they assess each other to fit within a specific social hierarchy. This is happening all the time and is an interactive process known as “status organizing.”⁶⁸ Reputation, conversely, is simultaneously related and yet nearly opposite from this concept. It is similar in its general “feel,” as well as its somewhat intangible nature. The two concepts are intertwined with the other, and the effects of one may have implications on the other. However, where status is “externally attributed” and “resulting from accumulated acts of deference,” reputation is instead “a measure of past quality, performance, or actions.”⁶⁹ Concomitant with each of these is an expectation of future action; status is associated with assumptions of how a person should act and perform based on their position in the social hierarchy, and reputation builds expectations from past actions.

As described in chapter 3, status represents how important people think you are, while reputation represents how good they think you are. Status is where an actor fits in any given social hierarchy, while reputation is what people think of the actor and expect from them based on what they are known

⁶⁶ Pierre-Marie Chauvin, “La sociologie des réputations. Une définition et cinq questions,” *Communications* 93, no. 2 (2013): 131–45, <https://doi.org/10.3917/commu.093.0131>.

⁶⁷ Chauvin, “La sociologie des réputations.”

⁶⁸ Alessandro Piazza and Fabrizio Castellucci, “Status in Organization and Management Theory,” *Journal of Management* 40, no. 1 (2014): 290, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206313498904>. It is important to note that there is some disagreement between disciplines regarding subjective and objective status. This dilemma is particularly evident in the sociology and social psychology fields and remains an active debate.

⁶⁹ Patterson, “It Does Matter How You Get to the Top.”

(or believed) to have done before. To maximize status is to seek deference from others, while maximizing and protecting reputation is more about how others perceive current and past actions.⁷⁰ Importantly, status generally refers to someone's place in a specific hierarchy and often does not easily transfer: for example, a person's ranking as an amateur angler has exceptionally little to do with their military rank. However, reputation often might have the ability to cross over between hierarchies, especially in the context of negative reputation indicators. Someone who is known to cheat in fishing tournaments may very well see their reputation as a cheater established within their military life as well. As one book on the subject of reputation is titled: *People Will Talk*.

This discrepancy is important in distinguishing between the two and explaining exactly how reputation matters. Boiled down to a logical extreme, status maximization is pure social climbing by many different means. A status maximizer might seek to dominate, earn prestige through competence, and devote their time to charity in a virtue display all at the same time, possibly even to the same audience. This effort to gain status may not require actual competence. As mentioned in the previous section, the appearance of competence or other obvious social cues may be sufficient on their own for status accrual.⁷¹ Status-seeking—regardless of the specific way it is to be attained—is an activity born of evolution that appears to be hardwired in the brain, although it is also informed by cultural concerns. While maximizing status is certainly not simple—if one could get to the top of the hierarchy just by trying hard, there would be nobody at the bottom—it is nonetheless something of a straightforward proposition.⁷² Conversely, reputation can be difficult to build and acquire, yet destroyed easily if not deliberately and ef-

⁷⁰ Alexander Styhre, *Status and Organizations: Theories and Cases* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022), 13, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09868-0>.

⁷¹ This ability to accrue status through appearance and signaling instead of demonstrating actual competence is a crucial mechanism for explaining the diffusion of different cultural trends. W. David Marx discusses this phenomenon extensively in *Status and Culture*.

⁷² This is a bit of hyperbole. Status competition and maximization has an extraordinarily high number of twists and turns, and human culture in particular is molded by, surrounded by, and simultaneously creates an exceptional number of different social status hierarchies that all interact with each other all the time and are constantly changing. Homo Sapiens' highly developed brain is probably the way it is at least in part due to the need to monitor and understand the multitude of different social hierarchies it interacts with. For an excellent in-depth discussion of sociocultural status, how it changes, and how it diffuses from high to low status actors, see Marx, *Status and Culture*.

fectively monitored and managed.⁷³ Importantly, as Daniel Carpenter has described, reputation can be differentiated from status in how it accrues: a person or organization might be thought to have more or less status within a given social hierarchy, but reputation does not really work this way. Someone might have a good or bad reputation, or an organization might have a reputation for something (e.g., they are very good at fishing), but it would be unusual for someone to have less of it.⁷⁴

What is the purpose of reputation? Although the goal of status accrual appears relatively clear: to increase where someone ranks in a social hierarchy with the concomitant effect of increasing access to as many resources (broadly defined) as possible, reputation is a more difficult concept. Why should people care about what other people have done in the past? Equally important, why should people care about what others think of what they have done in the past? Unlike status, which is “considered universal across social-living species, from nonhuman animals to all known human groups,” reputation is a particularly human concept.⁷⁵ In 1959, sociologist Erving Goffman wrote about the way people deliberately and constantly manage their behaviors, trying to emphasize things and actions that conform to whatever group they belong to in a given circumstance while simultaneously hiding things they think do not belong to the specific social context of whatever group they were interacting with.⁷⁶

This need to manage appearance—*reputation*—appears to be nearly as fundamental for *humans* as status (although not for other species): one study found that “beyond these instrumental functions [access to resources, interaction partner selection, influence effectiveness], it is worth considering that individuals also express an intrinsic motivation to be viewed positively by the groups to which they belong.”⁷⁷ Along with this intrinsic motivation comes social control. Unlike status maximization, reputation management is not only about achieving the highest rank in the hierarchy but is also about en-

⁷³ Sabrina Helm, “Corporate Reputation: An Introduction to a Complex Construct,” in *Reputation Management*, ed. Sabrina Helm, Kerstin Liehr-Gobbers, and Christopher Storck (Heidelberg, Berlin: Springer, 2011), 3, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-19266-1_1.

⁷⁴ Daniel Carpenter, *Reputation and Power: Organizational Image and Pharmaceutical Regulation at the FDA* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 57.

⁷⁵ Anderson and Kilduff, “The Pursuit of Status in Social Groups.”

⁷⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959).

⁷⁷ Nicoletta Cavazza, Margherita Guidetti, and Stefano Pagliaro, “Who Cares for Reputation?: Individual Differences and Concern for Reputation,” *Current Psychology* 34, no. 1 (March 2015): 164–76, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-014-9249-y>.

sure one does not *lose* position or goodwill within the group. Evolutionary psychologists and thinkers in related fields generally agree that this is the basic sociocultural purpose of reputation; it enables human groups to exercise social control over their members. John Whitfield believes that “reputation has enabled human cooperation to attain a breadth and complexity that no other species has managed, and it doesn’t need any higher power to enforce rules and dish out punishments.”⁷⁸ In short, reputation is an evolutionary adaptation that enables cooperation (and enforces conformity) among the members of complex human social groups.

Important here is the concept of gossip. Gossip seems like a trite topic for a work that seeks to establish the motivations behind military decisions and activities, but that could not be further from the truth.⁷⁹ Gossip and reputation are intrinsically linked topics; indeed, in the earliest human societies (and much studied hunter-gatherer societies), gossip was the means of enforcing reputation effects. How did these societies ensure that their members adhered to the social norms they had established and did not act in a socially deviant fashion? Once a member of a hunter-gatherer society appeared to be rising beyond the status the group’s norms allowed them to accrue, members of the group used gossip and mockery to attack and downgrade their reputation.⁸⁰ Instead of directly attacking their status, which would likely lead to violence and activate the dominance status mechanism, they instead attacked the individual’s reputation as a capable hunter, as a man, or in some other category prized by the tribe or group. In this sense, status and reputation are something of a recursive loop: humans seek to acquire as much status as they can all the time and in all ways. Simultaneously, humans build reputations within their various communities and hierarchies; their reputation is the group’s understanding of their past actions and estimation of likely future actions. If there is a discrepancy between the amount of status an individual accrues and their reputation within the group, the community will employ

⁷⁸ John Whitfield, *People Will Talk: The Surprising Science of Reputation* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 60; and Paul Bloom, *Psych: The Story of the Human Mind* (New York: Ecco, 2023), 245.

⁷⁹ The author is an infantry officer in the Marine Corps. The Marines in the infantry occupational specialty often claim that their community gossips more than nearly any other place in the world. There is actually research to support this idea to some degree because tight-knit communities with strict social norms *should be* expected to gossip a great deal. In this case, the stereotype appears to align with reality.

⁸⁰ Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 43–47.

reputation-destroying measures to quickly adjust their standing. This can be seen in human groups and societies that vary from the hunter-gatherer tribes already mentioned to large government regulatory organizations described in Daniel Carpenter's *Reputation and Power*.⁸¹

For the purposes of status maximizing military personnel, then, it stands to reason that reputation management would be a critical motivation. If maximizing status is the thing a member of the military is most likely to seek, they should be equally concerned with the other side of the coin—how they might lose their status. Reputation represents this factor. Unlike status, which might often be conferred by observers due to visual indicators, physical characteristics, provenance, or other localized and immediate signals, reputation takes time and effort to build. Notably, someone *can* build a reputation for something without actually demonstrating it, although it is more difficult to do so than with status. For several reasons particular to human psychology and perception, it is also much easier to lose reputation than it is to build a good one.⁸²

This is a problem compounded by the generally accepted human tendency toward loss aversion. Most social scientists accept the idea that human psychology is much more concerned about the risk of loss than it is about potential gains. This finding was most famously developed and popularized in Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's Nobel Prize winning work. In many disciplines, it is considered fundamental.⁸³ Because of these factors, military members should be, and are, at least as concerned about managing their personal reputations (particularly preventing reputational harm) as they are maximizing status. The way this most obviously manifests in military life is the famous, and much maligned, tendency toward risk aversion. Despite the fact that military service is inherently riskier than many occupations or

⁸¹ Carpenter, *Reputation and Power*.

⁸² Cavazza, Guidetti, and Pagliaro, "Who Cares for Reputation?"

⁸³ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (1979): 263–91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>; and Nicholas C. Barberis, "Thirty Years of Prospect Theory in Economics: A Review and Assessment," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 1 (2013): 173–95, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.27.1.173>. It is important to note that some modern scholarship questions whether this tendency is as well documented as the early experimental data suggested. One recent discussion of loss aversion described it as "among the most widely accepted ideas in the social sciences," but went on to claim that current evidence does not support this idea. See David Gal and Derek D. Rucker, "The Loss of Loss Aversion: Will It Loom Larger than Its Gain?," *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 28, no. 3 (2018): 497–516, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1047>.

other pursuits, the tendency toward risk aversion at all echelons in military bureaucracies is often lamented as inordinately high. As Carl von Clausewitz wrote in the early 1800s, “boldness grows *less common in the higher ranks*.”⁸⁴ To phrase it simply, accepting more risk increases the possibility that something might go wrong and thus damage someone’s reputation, causing both it and relative status to decline. As this is likely to be an unacceptable price to many within the hierarchy, we see the well-documented risk aversion that many have highlighted since Clausewitz’s perceptive words.⁸⁵ The concepts are inextricably tied together; someone cannot maximize status without effectively managing their reputation, and they cannot build a reputation without sufficient status to make it important for other people to notice, record, and transmit to one another thoughts, descriptions, and value judgments (good or bad) of their past actions.⁸⁶

Organizational Reputation

To this point, the description and discussion of reputation has focused on the individual. Just as status, however, organizations have their own reputations. Also, much like status, the different definitions and general understanding of this concept are often quite muddled. One review described organizational reputation as essentially everything from “being known, to being known for something, to generalized favorability.”⁸⁷ Political scientist Daniel Carpenter instead defines *organizational reputation* as “a set of symbolic beliefs about the unique or separable capacities, roles, and obligations of an organization, where these beliefs are embedded in audience networks.” He goes on to say

⁸⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 191. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ For an example of this discussion within the military, see Maj Michael J. Rasak, “We Don’t Run with Scissors: Why the U.S. Army Struggles with Risk Acceptance,” *Military Review* (September–October 2022). For broader discussion of how this manifests in the broader society and feeds back into the military sphere, see Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009).

⁸⁶ Indeed, there is some research to support the idea that pure competence is ineffective at building status in isolation. Just being good is insufficient; for example, those individuals who are high in agreeableness and do a very good job but do not have personality traits that lead them to self-promote are less likely to acquire high status than others who are merely competent but also make significant efforts toward accruing status. See Anderson and Cowan, “Personality and Status Attainment.”

⁸⁷ Donald Lange, Peggy M. Lee, and Ye Dai, “Organizational Reputation: A Review,” *Journal of Management* 37, no. 1 (2011): 153–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310390963>.

that “reputation forms a largely symbolic construct.”⁸⁸ This is a useful way of understanding organizational reputation; it is essentially what an audience believes about an organization based on what it has done before, and what they think it will do in the future. Importantly, as Carpenter discusses, organizational reputation can first be built on the status and reputations of individual members, but it often might eventually become its own unique property separate from its members. It can be simultaneously both an aggregated property and unique and specific to the organization.⁸⁹ Notably, however, just like individual reputations, organizational reputations must be managed and preserved; it is far easier to harm them than it is to build them. It is additionally important to note that while nearly everyone will be interested in defending and protecting their personal reputation, members of the organization who have greater status within it will interpret organizational reputation as “directly relevant to their status and esteem.”⁹⁰ The opposite side of the coin from the lance corporal on leave who benefited from increasing the perceived status of the Marine Corps, senior leaders within an organization recognize that the reputation of their organization is directly linked to their own: if the organization receives a bad name while they are in charge, their name and reputation is likely to be sullied with it.

Thus, people should expect essentially all members of the military bureaucracy to seek to maximize their status whether personal, organizational, or some combination of the two. As they do so, they will also seek to protect it by managing reputation. These two concepts are linked because someone might have high status within a group without a specific reputation. For example, a high-ranking officer who is not known to a group of servicemembers will automatically have high formal status. However, if this high-ranking individual were preceded by a poor reputation, they would have a far lower status with the group despite the formally attributed status given by the organization. If the angler described in earlier paragraphs were not known to be dishonest, only their rank would matter for formal status. However, if their fishing competitors spread the word that they are an outrageous cheat, their status within the military—an organization that generally prizes personal integrity—would surely suffer. The unique nature of the military bureaucratic system has prioritized these two factors. Hence, the system, the selection

⁸⁸ Carpenter, *Reputation and Power*, 45.

⁸⁹ Carpenter, *Reputation and Power*, 46.

⁹⁰ Carpenter, *Reputation and Power*, 67.

effects associated with it, and the basic evolutionary nature of humans living in groups all combine to make utility maximizing military personnel focus on accruing their personal status, protecting their personal reputation, and working to maximize and protect those of the organizations with which they identify. As we will discuss in the next chapter, this sort of maximization causes significant organizational problems in theoretical modeling that focuses mainly on dyadic relationships and in the far more complicated, real-world, multilevel hierarchies.

Chapter 5

The Principal-Agent Problem

But here the real difficulty lies in the fact that a general cannot always count on his corps commanders all having the sense and good intentions, courage and strength of character that would ideally be desirable. He is, therefore, not able to leave everything to their discretion, but must give them directives, which will restrict their actions and may easily render these inappropriate to the circumstances of the moment. That is a completely unavoidable disadvantage. No army can be properly commanded, in the absence of a dominant, authoritarian determination that permeates it down to the last man. Anyone who falls into the habit of thinking and expecting the best of his subordinates at all times is, for that reason alone, unsuited to command an army.

~ Carl von Clausewitz¹

President Muffley: General Turgidson, I find this very difficult to understand. I was under the impression that I was the only one in authority to order the use of nuclear weapons.

General Turgidson: That's right, sir, you are the only person authorized to do so. And although I, uh, hate to judge before all the facts are in, it's beginning to look like, uh, General Ripper exceeded his authority.

~ Doctor Strangelove²

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 510.

² *Dr. Strangelove*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, starring Peter Sellers (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1964).

There are many potential problems that might arise in a bureaucracy or hierarchy that have the basic contours described in the preceding chapters. First, the military, like most other bureaucracies and other hierarchical organizations is generally structured in line with a rational actor decision-making model. As discussed in chapter 1, despite decision-making models that generally assume this to be the way decisions are made, this probably does not capture either the how or the why of military (or other bureaucracies') decisions and subsequent actions. The reason for this is the self-interested nature of bureaucratic actors. Instead of the macroeconomic perspective where a decision is made with the best information at the top of hierarchy and then promulgated down the chain to the executors of the decision who fulfill it to the best of their ability without critical thought, alternative desires, or any significant amount of agency, the reality is far different when one examines decision making from the public choice, micro perspective. It is obvious that leaders and others high in the hierarchy often make decisions with far reaching and cascading effects, but there are two critical problems with this way of thinking about the process.³

In the words of economist Michael C. Munger and political scientist William R. Keech, "information problems are ubiquitous in human settings."⁴ This is intuitive to many who have spent time in a strict hierarchy and yet it is often overlooked. Information asymmetry is the primary issue here: rarely are decisions at the top of a large organization made with the best or most complete information, because there is too much to know and understand, and those who have complete knowledge of any specific issue are almost necessarily at the bottom of the chain. At the top of any hierarchy, the information available to decision makers is different than the information available to the actors who execute at the lowest levels and throughout the bureaucracy. In almost all studies of decision making in hierarchies, this is a completely noncontroversial take; thinkers generally assume information about specific problems is winnowed as it ascends the hierarchy, although the broader view of the organization's full set of problems that belongs to

³ There are, of course, many problems with organizational decision making in hierarchies in all its forms. This book will avoid much of this literature to prevent "missing the forest for the trees." This study will address only one or two of the most significant of these problems, and it focuses primarily on the subject of this chapter—the principal-agent problem.

⁴ William R. Keech and Michael C. Munger, "The Anatomy of Government Failure," *Public Choice* 164, no. 1 (July 2015): 1–42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-015-0262-y>.

higher-echelon members may serve as a mitigating factor allowing them to make effective decisions for the organization as a whole. World War I German soldier Ernst Jünger demonstrated this phenomenon well in his memoir *Storm of Steel*, describing a poorly planned and executed attack in 1917. After returning from the misbegotten patrol, he and a fellow soldier argue about the execution and then focus on “the most important aspect of the affair: the report.” Jünger then describes how they “wrote it in such a way that we were both satisfied,” clearly implying that the information passed to higher headquarters did not capture the reality of the event but instead made sure neither party lost status or reputation. Higher echelons only saw the information these actors wanted them to see.⁵

In the most charitable reading, this means each actor involved in decision making understands a problem differently, and thus may approach it with different heuristics, biases, and overall information. In this case, actors may simply interpret or misunderstand tasks and orders as they move down the hierarchy, as Robert Jervis described in his pivotal *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*.⁶ The particular nature of the military bureaucracy and how it passes information exacerbates the information asymmetry problem however. As Morris Janowitz wrote more than 50 years ago, “it [the oral briefing] is a reflection of the fact that the official flow of upward communication is less adequate in the military than in other bureaucracies.” Note that more than half a century later, this remains the primary/standard method for transmitting information within the U.S. military and most other Western militaries. He describes how single individuals within the military hierarchy can often be responsible for blocking the flow of information.⁷ We should expect them to; as professors Ruben Andersson and David Keen describe in their book *Wreckonomics*, “like politicians, those working within ministries and within a wide range of other bureaucratic organizations are likely to develop a sophisticated sense of what kinds of information are inconvenient,

⁵ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, Modern Classics Reprint Edition (London: Penguin Classic, 2004), 154–55.

⁶ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 2d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 207–8.

⁷ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 71. This is a part of a longer description of military oral briefing techniques where Janowitz suggests they exist as a deliberate workaround to mitigate this problem.

unwelcome, and even downright dangerous.”⁸ Max Weber is more blunt, claiming that echelons within the military bureaucracy deliberately protect information by exploiting the secrecy that comes along with responsibility for national security.⁹ The discussion will return to this item in subsequent chapters. There is little evidence that it has changed since Weber and Janowitz wrote about it many decades ago.¹⁰

Aside from the problem of information asymmetry and the fact that the highest echelons—those that ostensibly make the most important decisions—may have the least realistic information about each decision they are making, lies another, more important point. Decision makers throughout the chain often have different motivations. Many, even most, actors in the hierarchy may have preferences and opinions that differ from decision makers higher in the bureaucracy. In this case, each individual has several options that may help them achieve their personal preferences. First, they can simply withhold inconvenient information. Second, they can provide information selectively to manipulate the decisions made by those above them. This can manifest in many ways: choosing the right time to provide information, only releasing specific elements, crafting reports or other items to encourage readers to focus on preferred courses of action, and many other combinations. Third, they can selectively interpret orders or directions they have received to enable or allow them to act how they originally preferred. Finally, they might decide to act in alignment with the senior decision-makers’ preferences, assessing they may actually be in accordance with or at least generally supporting their own personal self-interest. Recall the definition of self-interest; in this case, it does not necessarily imply that a given actor has decided an action is *preferred*, only that it would be more beneficial to them to act in a certain way (e.g., “so I don’t get relieved of command or court-martialed” might be a perfectly rational, self-interested decision in this context).¹¹

This problem set is essentially the centralization-decentralization dichot-

⁸ Ruben Andersson and David Keen, *Wreckonomics: Why It’s Time to End the War on Everything* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 189.

⁹ Barry Posen, “Foreword: Military Doctrine and the Management of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 2 (2016): 159–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1115042>.

¹⁰ Peter Burke, *Ignorance: A Global History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 35.

¹¹ This is a common problem articulated by public choice students of bureaucracy along with many others. Gordon Tullock offers a useful discussion of this in Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, vol. 6, ed. Charles K. Rowley (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 70–88.

omy described in chapter 1. Historically, military decision-making theorists have seen two basic options in response to it. The first is the most common reaction of armies (and other hierarchies) throughout history: seek to centralize information, power, and decision-making authority as much as possible. Simplify tasks to such a degree that there is no latitude in interpretation or action. Treat subordinate members of the hierarchy as if they are robots and limit their ability to make decisions for themselves as much as possible.¹² The second option is to assume that every problem is unique based on its specific circumstances and too complex to fully understand at the highest echelons, that individuals closest to the problem will understand it best, and so instead of seeking to govern their decisions from higher echelons, instead provide them general guidance and broad latitude to solve the problem on their own. The issue with this approach, of course, is that in many, perhaps most, cases, the decision makers on the spot have the latitude to act in unexpected ways. Sometimes this will work well, but other times it might cause havoc in command-and-control hierarchies.¹³

The important point here is not to relitigate the discussion of specific decision-making models from chapter 1, but instead it is to emphasize the point that bureaucrats throughout the chain are not powerless, and they have many options beyond mindlessly acting in accordance with direction from those higher in the bureaucracy. Military thinkers have long understood this yet have also found it exceedingly difficult to break away from the top down, rational choice organizational decision-making model that has been ubiquitous as long as there have been writings on military command decisions. This basic problem has been oft discussed in public choice theory and associated disciplines such as organization theory and agency theory. It is most commonly known as the principal-agent problem, and we should expect it to cause significant problems for organizational rational choice decision making.¹⁴

The principal-agent problem is the focus of this chapter, and it is the

¹² Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 269.

¹³ Grauer, *Commanding Military Power*.

¹⁴ For a slightly different, though complementary approach to this problem, see Stafford Beer, *Brain of the Firm*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980); and Dan Davies, *The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions—And How the World Lost Its Mind* (London: Profile Books, 2024), 128–33.

second critical problem with rational choice decision models that assume a cascade of action continuing down the chain of command all the way to the executors. Military theorist Jim Storr recently called this way of thinking the “golden thread of purpose,” a phrasing that well captures the idea.¹⁵ Instead of a golden thread of purpose, or a single optimal choice rationally selected from a set of all possible options and then promulgated and executed down the chain of command, the reality is more a series of interlocking principal-agent problems, where each actor in the chain is self-interested, rational on their own, and guaranteed to have unique preferences that often do not align with some or all of the other members of the chain. This problem has been known for centuries. Indeed, although obviously phrased differently, Carl von Clausewitz highlights it as one of the many difficulties that arise when in command.¹⁶ A different classic in the international relations field, Robert Jervis’s *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* also offers a perceptive discussion of this problem. Jervis essentially asks, “What happens when agents have reason—perceived or real—to disobey the desires of their principal (the ultimate version of this is in the epigraph to this chapter, from the legendary *Doctor Strangelove*)?”¹⁷ This book asks the same question; however, it assumes, as Clausewitz does, that agents should always be expected to have reason to disobey their principal because they are guaranteed to have different interests at different echelons. Every person in the chain is a self-interested actor who seeks to maximize their own personal utility; it would be the height of folly to assume otherwise. The more important question is not whether or how agents will disobey but instead is how we can best align incentives within the military system. We will return to this question in chapter 9.

The principal-agent problem at its most basic level of analysis is a two-person (dyadic) relationship where one actor (the principal) delegates authority to another actor (the agent) to act on their behalf.¹⁸ The problems that arise in this relationship are many (and also probably obvious to many readers). The principal has particular desires; they want something accomplished.

¹⁵ Jim Storr, *Something Rotten: Land Command in the 21st Century* (Hampshire, UK: Howgate Publishing, 2022), 25–27.

¹⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 510.

¹⁷ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 2d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 332–38.

¹⁸ Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 55.

They want it done in a specific way, with specific outcomes. The agent, conversely, has different incentives. They might prefer to work as little as possible. They may instead think they have a better way to accomplish the goal the principal wants done. They may have a different focus entirely than the principal. In the context of a military example that became common during the Vietnam War, the principal may desire a deliberate effort to find and destroy the enemy, while the agent prefers only to protect their life. Patrols would be tasked, but the agents who executed them often just left friendly lines and sat quietly nearby instead of assuming the risk of executing the principal's required task.¹⁹ Above all, and as described in the preceding paragraphs, the agent *definitely* knows more about the specific task at hand than the principal and thus has a significant information advantage regarding that specific task. This does not imply that the agent is necessarily better educated about any task than the principal, only that the agent is actually executing and thus knows more about what they are doing than the principal possibly can.

What might the principal do to mitigate these issues? They might seek to develop ways to better monitor the agent. They might instead try to align incentives to make what is good for them also good for the agent.²⁰ In the business world, they might write a very clear contract that specifies exact details of what the agent is required to do that outlines clear punishments if the contract is not followed to the letter. Alternatively, they might try to incentivize the specific action and behavior they want to see through bonuses and other outcome-based remuneration.²¹ There has been much thought about the principal-agent problem in management literature, organization theory, and related topics, to include an entire organizational theory designed around it.²² Fewer thinkers have addressed it directly in the military literature, and when they have it has usually been from the perspective of civil-military relations, although some have re-

¹⁹ James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 306–7.

²⁰ Shapiro, "Agency Theory."

²¹ Dilip Mookherjee and Stefan Reichelstein, "Incentives and Coordination in Hierarchies," *Advances in Theoretical Economics* 1, no. 1 (2001): 4-na, <https://doi.org/10.2202/1534-5963.1009>.

²² See Ann L. Cunliffe and John T. Luhman, "Agency Theory," in *Key Concepts in Organization Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2012).

cently begun to think about and address it in broader military contexts.²³

Each of these recent military accounts deeply consider the principal-agent problem and its ramifications, but they mostly approach the military bureaucracy as a black box that can be treated as a unitary actor.²⁴ Once decisions are made—by civilians in most of this literature—the military will execute or not; regardless of outcome, however, the models usually speak only of the military, or if they are particularly granular, the military Services. Of course, as discussed previously, the military comprises many different entities, each of which is composed of a huge number of agents (and principals) at each echelon, all of whom make decisions based on their own self-interest and preferences. Crucially, as we have seen, the most likely motivation for military servicemembers is status maximization and reputation management. That means at each echelon, military servicemembers should *not* be expected to act based on patriotism, loyalty, budget maximization, or the “golden thread of purpose” that comes from a decision about some optimal military course of action (or at least a decision made at the highest echelons that purports to be the optimal one). Instead, we should expect individuals at each echelon to weigh the tasks they have been given, selectively interpret them through the lens of status and reputation management, and act to maximize these things in accordance with their interpretation.

Notably, the discussion here is a broader one than much agency theory literature often considers. In the framing of this chapter, a principal-agent interaction is not only an explicit order from a commander or senior ranking servicemember to a junior one. Obviously, that would be a clear example of a principal-agent interaction. However, the problem is far larger than that.

²³ For example, see Leo J. Blanken, Hy Rothstein, and Jason J. Lepore, eds., *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015); Feaver, *Armed Servants*; Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Brian J. Cook and B. Dan Wood, “Principal-Agent Models of Political Control of Bureaucracy,” *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 3 (1989): 965–78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962069>; and Jeffrey W. Donnithorne, “Principled Agents: Service Culture, Bargaining, and Agency in American Civil-Military Relations” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2013). For recent discussions considering broader military principal-agent problems, see Amos C. Fox, “Time, Power, and Principal-Agent Problems: Why the U.S. Army Is for Proxy Warfare Hotspots,” *Military Review* 99, no. 2 (2019): 28.

²⁴ The exception here can be found in Blanken and Lepore, “Principals, Agents, and Assessment,” in *Assessing War*. This is an excellent treatment of the principal-agent problem, although the author contends that because it is focused almost entirely on assessment in war it does not go far enough in its discussion.

Any interaction between members of the hierarchy who have a formal status differential (due to rank, position, or some other indicator) that includes some interpretation of the senior's preferences, desires, or some other form of predilection is a principal-agent interaction. Even more interesting, because of the unconscious status interpretation that occurs in every human interaction, even when the principal is not seeking to make their preferences clear, agents will nonetheless seek to understand them. Whether they understand the principal's *actual* preferences is beside the point. The agent will hear these preferences and opt to either adhere to them or not; if they choose to adhere to the principal's preferences, they will decide how exactly to match them, which information or activity best does so, and in what way they can satisfy the principal's desire while also achieving their own personal preference.

Often, the incentives align. In the U.S. military and much of the Western world, military personnel answer almost exclusively to leaders in the two echelons of the hierarchy above them: their immediate supervisor one echelon above them and their supervisor one echelon above that.²⁵ In many cases, it makes sense to do exactly what a direct senior in the chain of command tasks you to do in order to best maximize your (or your unit's) future status or protect its reputation. In cases where it does not, however, the agent, or subordinate in this scenario, may decide to act in a way they believe will best maximize their status and reputation. Often, though, even if the subordinate believes there are better options available, they will still opt to do as they are told; the costs of poor performance or disobedience can be significant, and as described in the previous chapter, humans usually prefer to minimize losses rather than maximize gains.²⁶ In other cases, the potential status gains of disobedience or "mal-obedience" might outweigh the drawbacks.²⁷ In some extreme examples like that of Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Stuart

²⁵ See Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 215. Different Services in the U.S. military have different names for these individuals, but aside from the Navy, each of the Services uses two evaluators for performance reporting. For example, the Army calls these individuals the "rater" and "senior rater," respectively, while the Marine Corps uses "reporting senior" and "reviewing officer." Even though this relationship is very clear when put into a line diagram, as early as 1945 Herbert Simon eloquently described the problems with understanding real authority in relationships like this. See Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997).

²⁶ Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, 70–114.

²⁷ *Mal-obedience* refers to deliberately obeying poorly by using one of the many options available to agents, for example, slow rolling, accidentally misinterpreting the task, providing selective information, or other similar methods.

Scheller's decision to publicly challenge the leadership of his Service in 2021, an agent might assess the status gained from direct disobedience to be worth the quite high price they could have to pay.²⁸ In other examples, we might see activity more akin to that of the French Army fighting on the World War I western front in 1915, where, as historian David Stevenson describes, "an order to attack meant in practice doing what the unit judged feasible, which rarely entailed fighting to the last man or advancing if the sole result would be pointless casualties."²⁹

Compounding the problem, at each command or staff echelon, if there is a conflict between an individual and their next higher echelon leader, service-members must decide whether to remain loyal to their direct senior, or principal (who likely maintains the most power over them), or to defect and instead defer to the next higher principal in the chain (or possibly much further up the chain). It is common for military personnel to use guidance issued by leaders many echelons above them as justification for an act they wish to take even if it does not correspond directly to orders from their immediate leaders. As Gordon Tullock discussed in *The Politics of Bureaucracy*, the basic expectation in American bureaucracies for most of the post-World War II era has been for an agent to "remain loyal to his immediate superior," and "support his superior against those in the next rank above."³⁰ This expectation comes with major difficulties however. In *Road to Disaster*, historian Brian VanDeMark describes how Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara was forced to "constantly engage in what social psychologists call 'vertical code-switching,' a process that occurs when those in the middle of a hierarchy—in this case, the chain of command—frequently alternate between incompatible roles

²⁸ For the video that initiated this confrontation, see LtCol Stuart Scheller, "I Demand Accountability," YouTube.com, 2021. For a detailed description of this series of incidents, see Philip Athey, "The Unmaking of Lt. Col. Stuart Scheller," *Military Times*, 8 March 2022. This case might also be interpreted as focusing on status in different hierarchies. While Scheller lost much formal status within the Marine Corps and informal status with his peers and seniors in service, he nonetheless accrued significant informal status from multiple audiences outside the service and from many current and former Marines. This study does not take a position on the correctness of Scheller's claims; this example instead highlights how the principal agent problem might manifest when there are agents at different levels in the hierarchy with directly contradictory truth claims.

²⁹ David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 171.

³⁰ Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, 45.

with very different expectations and very different power dynamics.”³¹ Just as Robert McNamara, literally the top individual within the Department of Defense hierarchy, struggled with this, so might each servicemember throughout the chain. It is not uncommon for individuals within the military hierarchy to receive one set of orders from their immediate supervisor and yet provide some different orders or direction to those below them, even if only different by minor degrees or nuance.

Viral episodes like Lieutenant Colonel Scheller’s notwithstanding, the principal-agent problem exists mostly “under the table” within the military hierarchy. Disobedience or misaligned goals between principal and agent are rarely so blatant as this discussion might suggest. Extreme examples like the Scheller case are rare in the professional, modern U.S. military.³² Less extreme pursuit of goals that do not align is just as problematic as such blatant cases however. If public choice theory is even mostly right, then the rational choice theorists who see military operations as a cascading set of tasks that emanate from decisions made at the highest levels are at best oversimplifying and at worst fundamentally wrong. How might misaligned incentives manifest? Perhaps an agent might outright spin reporting, falsely describing negative events as positive ones. Perhaps an agent might only report information that maximized their status or reputation while not reporting other important events.³³ Perhaps instead of such deliberate reputation management, an agent might instead only selectively report specific events—only those that “look good.” If this seemed too misaligned with the principal or likely to incur negative reputational effects, perhaps the agent might merely reframe reporting to frame all events—even negative ones—in the most favorable light possible, thereby distorting the image leadership up the chain received. Each of these and many more are manifestations of the principal-agent relationship and

³¹ Brian VanDeMark, *Road to Disaster: A New History of America’s Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Custom House, 2018), 381; and Eric M. Anicich and Jacob B. Hirsh, “The Psychology of Middle Power: Vertical Code-Switching, Role Conflict, and Behavioral Inhibition,” *Academy of Management Review* 42, no. 4 (2017): 659–82, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2016.0002>.

³² For a discussion of the potential “dark side” of this professionalism, see chapter 9.

³³ The most famous American agent in this regard is without question Gen Douglas MacArthur. His status maximization efforts will be discussed in the next two chapters.

misaligned incentives at each level of command.³⁴ As the scholars Leo Blanken and Jason Lepore wrote,

when one considers that many thousands (perhaps millions) of agents in a cascade of principal-agent relationships constitute the war effort, even a small incentive to inflate numbers across the battle space can create a large-scale torrent of systematically distorted information. It may occur not only through qualitative self-reporting but also through the choice of self-serving quantitative metrics by subordinate agents.³⁵

If members of the military are status and reputation maximizers, regardless of echelon of command, this sort of distorted picture, along with actions that create it, should be extremely common in the U.S. military. As illustrated in the next several chapters, this is indeed the case.

³⁴ The author has personally seen or experienced each of these while deployed to Afghanistan. For an excellent discussion of these reporting failures in the U.S. military's most modern war, see Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021). A more recent and equally telling example can be found in the Russian invasion of Ukraine (still ongoing at the time of this writing). Extensive reporting has described huge principal-agent problems in Russian formations. For example, see Michael Schwartz et al., "Putin's War: The Inside Story of a Catastrophe," *New York Times*, 17 December 2022.

³⁵ Blanken and Lepore, "Principals, Agents, and Assessment," 12.

Part 2

Manifestations

The following chapters are neither structured nor designed to prove a hypothesis in the manner often expected in works of modern social science. Although used here more as a framing device than mathematical proof, public choice theory, as such, has long since been proven by at least five Nobel laureates and ever-increasing amounts of scholarship.¹ The scientific evidence that shows individuals within the military to generally maximize status and protect reputation is clear. Much of it was presented in chapters 3, 4, and 5, and this evidence continues to accrue. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are not intended as formal cases so much as data points that align with the evidence presented in the previous chapters. Instead of cases proving a hypothesis, they are instead designed for the reader who says, “I believe what you’re telling me, but I don’t entirely understand how this would play out in real life.” Although this is a nuanced difference, it is important. The author does not expect the reader to walk away from chapters 6, 7, and 8 with the impression that the examples therein proved the hypothesis. They will not. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction, this book is structured as it is based on the position that this is not actually possible in the social sciences and thus it does not attempt it. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provided the scientific and scholarly evidence, and part 2 will simply illustrate examples of how and where we might see the phenomenon those chapters described if we look backward in history. The set of examples is not exhaustive, but as the introduction described, it does attempt to at least address every major American war of the twentieth century.

¹ As discussed in chapter 3, public choice can include a huge range of different subtheories and disciplines. The five Nobel laureates referenced here are James M. Buchanan, Kenneth Arrow, George Stigler, Vernon Smith, and Elinor Ostrom; although depending on how broadly public choice is defined, several other Nobel Prize recipients could also be included in this list. See “All Nobel Prizes,” Nobel Prize, accessed 17 January 2025.

This book also does not purport to be a work of original history; it is instead a synthesis of many different disciplines' existing scholarship. While it does employ primary sources where able, it does not develop previously unused or extensive archival and primary source evidence to support the more than 50 historical examples that the following chapters discuss. Where able, the book uses primary source evidence to show examples of contemporaneous accounts that align with those of historians who have since interpreted them, but it does not claim to be anything other than a derivative work of history (it does not claim to be a formal work of history at all, for that matter). Indeed, instead of identifying and clarifying new evidence or interpretations from a historical perspective, it instead trusts that professional historians have "done their homework" in this regard.

However, the author also recognizes the limitations inherent in using secondary sources, particularly in a work that covers as much historical territory as this one. Every case described in this volume employs multiple histories that concur on the description described. Nonetheless, it is entirely reasonable, given the fact that this is a book that makes the case that individuals prioritize status and reputation—sometimes at the expense of truthfulness or accuracy—for readers to ask, "Why would these historians not obfuscate, embellish, or otherwise exaggerate their cases to accrue status to themselves?"² Where possible, the use of primary sources will aid in this to some degree, but nonetheless, as historians well know, primary sources can have their own problems.

One of the difficulties with a book such as this—that makes a case about individual *motivation*—is that even the most straightforward of primary source documents may not have been written devoid of guile or without a subtext of status and reputation management. Indeed, historians have often assessed even personal diaries—ostensibly written to describe someone's inner thoughts or record their personal experiences—to be corrupted by the knowledge of their possible use by future historians or, for example, in the case of leaders such as British field marshal Douglas Haig, their possible contemporaneous use as a "back channel" status seeking mechanism.³ This is strikingly common; in following pages, we will discuss examples of this sort of "meta" reputation management by any number of figures. Sometimes this occurred

² The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

³ See "Introduction," in Douglas Haig, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters, 1914–18*, ed. Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (London: Phoenix, an imprint of Orion Books, 2006), 1–43.

with blatant and deliberate intent, such as in the case of Austrian general Franz Graf Conrad von Hötzendorf, U.S. Army general Douglas MacArthur, Haig, or Army general George S. Patton—all of whom edited their diaries well after they were written to ensure the “proper” representation of events was known by future historians. Other such events were more subtle and less obviously deliberate, such as in the case of Army general William C. Westmoreland “influencing” representations of troop numbers or Army general Dwight D. Eisenhower directing the destruction of his wartime diaries. Even if these examples and many others were not intended for the purpose of reputation management, it is impossible to avoid the fact that any number of the figures who will be discussed in the following chapters edited, cultivated, or otherwise sought to shape their contemporaneous writings to protect their future reputations. In many cases, and as historians understand better than anyone, individuals recorded their observations and thoughts with an eye toward what might be said of them in the present and future. Finally, memoirs and recollections after the fact should be treated with skepticism in most cases. The human memory is particularly fallible and consistently adjusts to ensure that the person remembering is the “main character,” who acted in accordance with their values, regardless of the actual events that may have taken place.⁴ Status and reputation management shapes all human activity, even that of memory or contemporaneous primary source evidence.

In one sense, this is exactly as one should expect, given the evidence in the preceding chapters. In another, however, it might be frustrating to readers steeped in history who seek extensive primary source documentation or readers familiar with political science works who would prefer detailed cases showing proof. This is one more reason for the slightly unusual structure and method behind this book; since it does not seek to prove any specific case, but instead to generalize, it accepts that some number, perhaps even most, of the examples presented have alternative explanations. The case made here is

⁴ This is a commonly replicated finding in psychology and related disciplines. See Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (but Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*, 3d ed. (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2020), 7; Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2013), 18; and Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 113.

something of a “revealed preferences” type of argument.⁵ In many of the examples described in the following chapters, actors might have truly believed they were altruistic and self-sacrificing. In light of the evidence presented in the first half of the book, however, we should grapple honestly with the possibility that even this true belief is confabulation or self-deception. The following pages present an approach that uses the scientific evidence and theoretical heuristic outlined in part 1 to better understand otherwise inexplicable actions on the part of leaders, servicemembers, and organizations.

The Examples

This book uses an exceptionally broad set of examples to illustrate its case, and as already discussed, it deliberately and knowingly commits an unpardonable sin for the political science field—argument by example. This is intentional and done for good reason, but it will likely cause consternation and perhaps even anger among a subset of readers. Nonetheless, the book endeavors to provide the background evidence for the argument as clearly and accurately as possible in previous chapters, and it will seek to be as true to the examples that show this evidence in practice as possible. This is a difficult challenge, given both the number of examples that follow as well as the different levels or echelons of command at which many of them apply.

The examples presented span everything from the strategic level of war—the senior leaders who make and implement strategy—all the way to the tactical and most minor bureaucratic elements within the military. Despite this breadth and efforts to avoid the impression of “cherry picking” examples as much as possible, the author concedes that this is a difficult, if not impossible, endeavor. Although the examples address the set of every major war the United States engaged in during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, even this is subject to accusations of cherry-picking evidence as it is difficult to even find agreement regarding what meets the criteria for a major war. Within this set is more room for debate. More importantly, perhaps, is that any set of examples or cases is inherently limited in a work that seeks to speculate on motivation at all levels of war. Indeed, it is simply not possible to use

⁵ The most basic articulation of revealed preference theory is that an “individual chooses that option which gives her the highest utility among all feasible options.” Thus, if you pay attention to the choices individuals make, you can understand which utility they most prefer. See Christopher P. Chambers and Federico Echenique, *Revealed Preference Theory*, Econometric Society Monographs no. 56 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), xiii, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316104293>.

an exhaustive set of every person who has ever participated in an American war or served in the American military during the twentieth century, which is what would need to be done to “prove” the framing in a “large-n” style analysis. Extrapolating individual behavioral rules from a set of two or three “deep dive” cases would be more difficult. The community of believers in social science methods might argue that a mixed-method approach could provide the best of both worlds and would indeed be able to prove this case. That would only prove the case in a historical—possibly confabulatory—sense. This book neither claims to predict nor gives credence to the possibility of rigorous prediction in the social sciences.⁶

The set of conflicts is also inherently limited, and the analysis is deliberately so. This set of examples does not address non-Western militaries, except in a few rare circumstances. Although there are examples of generally Western or Westernized militaries such as the Germans of World Wars I and II and the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy of World War II, the reader will only find tangential reference to other conflicts that surely deserve study. Middle Eastern wars such as the Six-Day War (1967), Yom Kippur War (1973), or Iran-Iraq War (1980) are given short shrift, as are wars fought by India, China, Vietnam, and many others. Perhaps the most glaring omission in the cases is the neglect of the Russian military in World War I and the Soviet military in World War II. This is not because ample evidence does not exist to support the public choice interpretation of military decision making here; for example, as British historian David Stevenson described in his outstanding history of the Great War, Russian forces were hampered by “endemic faction fighting in the officer corps,” where none of the generals leading Russian armies in the early fighting of the war “co-operated with each other in a professional manner.”⁷ Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the Russian commander in chief in 1914, agreed with this interpretation, describing before the war how, “in our vast empire, having given an order, you can never be sure whether it will

⁶ For in-depth discussions of the problems of prediction in the social sciences, see Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2015); and Forecasting Collaborative, “Insights into the accuracy of social scientists’ forecasts of societal change,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 7 (2023): 484–501, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01517-1>.

⁷ David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 54–55.

reach its destination.”⁸ These omissions are simply because the line had to be drawn somewhere.

The reader may note that most of the examples paint their subjects in a negative light. This is not a deliberate choice to disparage these leaders and servicemembers but is instead because it is often easier to see principal-agent dynamics and public choice at work when it results in conflict or suboptimal action. When these dynamics generate positive results, often the confabulation that comes along with history making and internal story telling fails to highlight them at all, instead defaulting to the idea that the system worked. As the axiom goes, “victory has 100 fathers, but defeat is an orphan.”⁹ Despite the focus on negative action here, these dynamics are at work when organizations or individuals achieve successful outcomes just as often as negative ones.

The examples cited at the strategic level are probably the least subject to accusations of cherry picking, as they represent the senior leadership of most belligerents in almost every war covered. Nonetheless, this set is not exhaustive and evidence of strategic-level motivations—whether primary or secondary sources—is particularly lacking for more modern wars. The lack of such scholarship regarding Vietnamese leadership during the Vietnam War is well known, and subsequent wars such as the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm, 1990–91), Global War on Terrorism (Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001–14), and the Iraq War (Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003–11), suffer from similar problems.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the examples cover the strategic leadership of each of the major participants in as much depth as possible in the following pages.

As we leave the strategic level and move lower in the hierarchy to consider operational decisions, there will necessarily be many more operational commanders than strategic. Chapter 7 will address a broad swath of examples, but it will certainly be open to criticisms of cherry picking. It is not possible to make an exhaustive case of all operational commanders making self-interest-

⁸ Quoted in Nick Lloyd, *The Western Front: A History of the Great War, 1914–1918* (New York: Liveright, 2021), 68.

⁹ Though used by President John F. Kennedy, “President’s News Conference of April 21, 1961 (139),” *Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1961*, the first known use of this saying was much earlier by Count Galeazzo Ciano, who was the Italian foreign minister and son-in-law of Benito Mussolini.

¹⁰ For a notable exception to this in the Vietnam War context, see Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

ed decisions in a book of this length and maybe of any length. Instead, as the narrative transitions to the operational and tactical levels of war, the evidence described in previous chapters—psychological, sociological, evolutionary, and organizational, among other disciplines— provides the theoretical underpinning while the examples simply show the many ways in which it could be expected to manifest.

Tactical and bureaucratic motivations are even more subject to the cherry-picking charge. These make up a near infinite set of potential actions and examples. Ample evidence is provided to support the case made, however, any example at this level of warfare is likely to call up a counter example in the minds of many readers. The book will not dispute this and even embraces it in many ways. Human activity is multifarious, complex, and informed by any number of factors beyond the ones described in this book. Nonetheless, the research supports the idea that, on average, most decisions made at various levels within the military structure are largely shaped and indeed driven by a fundamental desire for status and reputation.

Chapter 6

A Strategy of Self-Interest

It is consistent with this wholly misplaced materialistic bias that Congress is much more tolerant of lethal incompetence than of mere venality. The general who loves his poodle too much or the admiral who may have asked a sailor to paint his fence during duty hours is harshly criticized, while their colleague who planned a debacle that humiliated the entire nation and killed several soldiers is easily forgiven. There is no procedure, or seemingly even the desire, to root out military incompetence.

~ Edward Luttwak¹¹

The further one gets from the front, the more the idea of duty is separated from risk. In the highest ranks, it is entirely theoretical, a pure intellectual game. It merges with concern for one's responsibilities, reputation, and advancement, unites personal success with national success, which are in opposition for those doing the fighting.

~ Gabriel Chevallier¹²

As the preceding chapters make clear, the public choice interpretation of military decisions applies to every individual in the bureaucracy and is found at all levels, regardless of how you break them apart. In one interpretation, favored by the military and many thinkers within the broad sphere of military theory, this phenomenon might be applied to the different levels of war: strategy,

¹¹ Edward Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War: The Question of Military Reform* (New York: Touchstone, 1986), 153.

¹² Gabriel Chevallier, *Fear*, trans. Malcom Imrie (London: Serpent's Tail, 2011), 160.

operations (or the operational level), and tactics.¹³ Alternatively, one might look at this phenomenon purely from an individual versus an organizational standpoint. This distinction is often found between the literature of sociology and social psychology, on the one hand, and organization theory, on the other. Although there are important differences in terminology and how status and reputation differences manifest in various places, the basic idea presented by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s “you know it when you see it” does not significantly change regardless of where you look. The following chapters, offer examples of self-interested actions that maximize status and reputation effects in each of these different levels and interpretations. These examples invariably highlight the principal-agent problem at different levels; almost without fail, when an individual is acting in a self-interested manner it is at cross purposes with the larger policy design or strategy. In some cases, like Douglas MacArthur’s spectacular implosion during the Korean War, this is glaringly obvious. In others, such as the claim that Douglas Haig deliberately deceived British Prime Minister David Lloyd George “with regard to casualty rates and his own plans,” the duplicity emerges from historians’ reconstruction after the fact (and often remains hotly debated).¹⁴ Regardless of how well known or obvious the evidence, the principal-agent problem is a consistent thread; it necessarily emerges any time military decisionmakers made choices based on their own self-interest and not on a higher policy, direction, or greater good. This is far more common than most military histories, decision-making theories, or analyses generally allow.

Grand Strategy

First, however, a note on grand strategy. This book is about the military and its activities in war and peace. It is not about grand strategy, although the Venn diagram of these categories obviously overlaps a great deal. Richard Hanania has written persuasively about the way public choice can explain the grand strategy of the United States, and his conclusions will not be re-litigated here.¹⁵ From Hanania’s standpoint and the theory proposed here, grand strategy as it is often framed by international relations literature or

¹³ *Joint Warfighting*, vol. 1, Joint Publication (JP) 1 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2023); and *The Joint Force*, vol. 2, JP 1 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020).

¹⁴ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Pearson, 1974), 13.

¹⁵ Richard Hanania, *Public Choice Theory and the Illusion of American Grand Strategy: How Generals, Weapons Manufacturers, and Foreign Governments Shape American Foreign Policy* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2022).

other military thought essentially does not exist or at least does not exist as a positivist, deliberate activity. Instead, it is a form of confabulation, where just as the mind might interpret individual actions by creating a unifying story to explain them, historians and others look backward in time and develop stories to support the events that actually took place.

The fields of security-focused international relations theory, military thought, and military theory dominated by the broad school of thought generally called *structural realism* or *systemic realism* generally argue that the structure of the international system is the most important determinant of state behavior and, by extension, assume that states make deliberate, rational decisions within the international system in response to the specific context or environment in which they find themselves.¹⁶ In *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy*, Kevin Narizny disagrees with this interpretation, alleging that the “dichotomy between the study of international security and the rest of political science is conceptually bankrupt.”¹⁷ He goes on to explain how realist theories are systemic; they examine behavior of groups or systems from the highest level of interactivity possible. Liberal theories, on the other hand, begin by looking at the “lowest level of interest aggregation: the individual.”¹⁸ The current volume, although far from a formal work of liberal international relations theory, takes the latter viewpoint. As Narizny describes, this is essentially a claim about analytic priority – where does one look to best understand the behavior of large systems (states) that comprise international politics? The perspective found here aligns with the liberal viewpoint that Andrew Moravcsik best articulated, “The fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups.”¹⁹ While one might examine the behavior of systems from any level, because of the dynamics described in part 1 it is clear that the individual matters; indeed, *individuals matter the most*. As Robert Jervis wrote, “few if any realms of human conduct are completely determined at

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of realism generally, different schools within the discipline, and the so-called international relations “paradigm wars,” see Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

¹⁷ Kevin Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007). 1.

¹⁸ Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy*, 7. For a realist perspective on this divide, see Mark R. Brawley, *Political Economy and Grand Strategy: A Neoclassical Realist View* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–3.

¹⁹ Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–53, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550447>.

the systems level. Actors' choices are crucial . . . and are influenced by beliefs about how the system operates."²⁰ Examining the interaction of systems from the highest level opens the possibility of "false positives," where the analyst attributes deliberate decision and motive to an actor where in reality there is only emergent behavior.²¹ This is exactly what most military decision-making theorists have done; and just as grand strategy is better understood as a set of revealed preferences, the aggregate of an extremely complex web of individual and organizational decisions military operations is as well.²²

Grand strategy is by its very definition made at the highest echelons of government. As Paul Kennedy wrote, "the crux of grand strategy lies therefore in *policy*."²³ As such, it lies beyond the claims and interpretation of this volume. However, divorcing grand strategy and military strategy (or operations and tactics) entirely is an impossible task. It would be disingenuous to argue that many, if not most, actions that affect national grand strategy are not at least influenced by military actors and vice versa.²⁴ Indeed, although the approach applied here argues that "there's nobody driving the bus" regarding most claims that a policy or set of policies represent a grand strategy and that even the few that seem to have some real coherence are more a series of complementary decisions by individuals who are making decisions in their own self-interest than they are deliberate, rational, decisions from the top of

²⁰ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

²¹ *Emergent behavior* is a trait in which the different elements of a complex system achieve some unique behavior by working together executing simple rules. Examples of this include the motion of flocks of birds and schools of fish, the success of German *Sturmtruppen* formations in World War I, and many other behaviors. It is essentially impossible to forecast emergent behavior that results from the interaction of complex, nonlinear systems. For more on emergence, see Jervis, *System Effects*, 15–18.

²² Chambers and Echenique, *Revealed Preference Theory*.

²³ See "Grand Strategies in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition," in Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 5. Emphasis original.

²⁴ Many military thinkers prefer to claim exactly that. Most legendary in this line of thought is Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, although there are many others in this regard. The author disagrees with this line of thinking entirely. It is fundamentally impossible to divorce the military and political systems, and to suggest otherwise is fantasy. For further discussion of this topic, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 1981); and Matthew A. McGrew, *Politics and the Operational Level of War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, Army Command and General Staff College, 2011).

the system, that does not intend to suggest that no actors deliberately seek to influence the direction of government policy. Indeed, many succeed in changing and shaping policy.

Like Narizny and Jervis, however, this volume claims that what historians and pundits see through the lens of theory and with the benefit of historical hindsight as grand strategy is at the time only one course of action out of an infinite number of possible options, and the actual course chosen by no means resulted from a rational actor deliberately assessing and selecting for any one specific strategic design from the infinite set of available options. Nor did it result from a single leader or government agency exercising bounded rationality and choosing from the best of a set of what Herbert Simon calls “cognitively available” options.²⁵ As Lawrence Freedman, a consummate student of strategy, has written, “strategy remains hard to pin down. People are described as having acted strategically without ever having known the term, and those that have used the term knowingly have not always meant the same thing. It is a term employed to understand the actions of others, in ways they might not recognize, and also one which individuals employ to explain their own actions, in ways others might not accept.”²⁶

The very idea of *strategy* is clearly a muddled one. The public choice perspective taken here suggests that instead of the purposive, deliberate behavior many grant the idea, grand strategy arises from self-interested, individual choices. In the case of the political direction of grand strategy, assuming it to be a set of politically expedient actions that cohere in hindsight into an apparently unified effort is a more effective way to understand it. As British historian Paul Johnson wrote of American strategy in the post World War II era, “it would be a mistake, however, to give American policy a logic and global coherence it did not actually possess. There was never a master-plan: more a series of makeshift expedients, with huge holes and gaps and many contradictions.”²⁷ This applies to most grand strategy. Some, even most, of this set of “makeshift expedients” are probably in line with the “national interest,” but there is no “unitary actor” or even group of actors at the top of

²⁵ Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-making Processes in Administrative Organizations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997).

²⁶ Laurence Freedman, “Strategy: The History of an Idea,” in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 18.

²⁷ Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).

government who choose a grand strategy based on some set of clearly defined and understood interests. Indeed, Bernard Brodie explained the subjective and malleable nature of national interests in *War and Politics*, writing that “vital interests, despite common assumptions to the contrary, have only a vague connection with objective fact.”²⁸

Additionally, as Richard Hanania wrote, “while providing theoretical convenience, arguments for the unitary actor model do not hold up to scrutiny.”²⁹ Neither the idea of national interest writ large nor the idea of a single actor or set of actors making unitary decisions works when subjected to even the slightest direct examination. To wit, it is easy to see the shifting understanding of national interests in even the most existential of wars. None of the nations involved in World War I had consistent understandings of their interests or war aims. Historian David Stevenson writes compellingly about how the aims of the belligerents during World War I changed constantly, explaining that “the two sides’ objectives were in constant flux.” This sort of constant shifting of aims and perceived interests proves the point: even in a conflict where the stakes and interests were literally existential for most of the participants and thus seem as if they should have been obvious, the belligerents were unable to clearly articulate what they sought to achieve and readily adjusted it when they thought they might achieve more or leaders paid heed to domestic political considerations over military expediency.³⁰ In some sense, this echoes Geoffrey Blainey’s discussion in *The Causes of War*, where he describes war as ultimately a disagreement about power, in which national interest is based on the perception of relative power between belligerents, and war aims and interests shift as this perception changes.³¹

It is also notable that, although there has been very little work done on status and reputation as critical themes *within* the military hierarchy, several recent political science works looked at status and reputation as drivers of activity within the larger international system. In *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*, Jonathan Renshon explored the ways status dissatisfaction might lead to international conflict.³² Many authors have

²⁸ Brodie, *War and Politics*, 2.

²⁹ Hanania, *Public Choice Theory and the Illusion of American Grand Strategy*, 36.

³⁰ Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 103–22.

³¹ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988).

³² Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400885343>.

explored reputation in international politics, both recently and during the nervous days of the Cold War, when deterrence theorists sought to articulate and understand Thomas Schelling's formulation of reputation.³³ Finally, Jason Lyall's recent work, *Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War*, discusses status differences *within* armies and how they affect battlefield performance. This work primarily argues that inequality within armies can explain the "patterns and dynamics of battlefield performance in modern war since 1800," focusing primarily on status differences between individuals and groups within different militaries.³⁴ The current volume does not engage with this argument directly; although different levels of status and how they change battlefield performance are important for the theory outlined here, ultimately, they will not significantly change it. Inequality is assumed to be a fundamental fact of all hierarchies and is thus a constant as a part of military systems.³⁵

The above works do make it clear that many policy decisions and senior leader actions are taken for reasons of status, reputation, or both. Several other thinkers have made the case that national prestige, honor, and status are some of the most important factors driving strategic behavior. Political scientist Richard Ned Lebow analyzed a "data set of all 94 wars from 1648 to the present that involved at least one great or rising power." He found that "the overwhelming majority of wars—62 percent—were motivated by honor, that is fought for standing or revenge."³⁶ Beyond, and even more indicative than, the analysis of political scientists and historians, however, are the ac-

³³ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020). For an example of more modern works on reputation and how it manifests in the international system, see Mark Crescenzi, *Of Friends and Foes: Reputation and Learning in International Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190609528.001.0001>; and Frank P. Harvey and John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility: US Reputation and International Politics* (Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3138/j.ctv1005chw>.

³⁴ Jason Lyall, *Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

³⁵ Lyall is primarily discussing marginalization of different groups and not individuals within the hierarchy. He explicitly states, "Inequality here is thus a political construct, one that establishes categories of membership within the community. It is also group-based, not individual-centric, in its focus." Lyall, *Divided Armies*, 4–5.

³⁶ Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: 40th Anniversary Revised Edition* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2020), 485, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43443-4>. See also Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511761485>.

tions of leaders. Reference to “national prestige,” in particular, is almost unbelievably common in quotes from different national leadership. Whether British reasoning about the Falkland Islands in 1952, German thinking in the 1911 Agadir Incident, Tsar Nicholas’s explanation of Russia’s actions immediately before World War I, or future British prime minister David Lloyd George arguing “that I believe it is essential in the highest interests, not merely of this country, but of the world, that Britain should at all hazards maintain her place and her prestige amongst the Great Powers of the world.” It is readily apparent that reasons of status and reputation are often given much value in policy decisions on the international stage.³⁷ As historian Jörn Leonhard writes of the July crisis that preceded the beginning of World War I, “the risks of war appeared to many leading players in 1914 as evidently lower than the risk of a loss of international prestige through a de-escalation of the crisis.”³⁸ In many of these circumstances, the term *honor* is used where we might otherwise expect to see status, prestige, or reputation. One of the earliest terms that generally fits within the rubric of status or prestige, Thucydides used it to refer to the dynamics of “reputation, glory, and standing.” A more modern study characterized honor as “deference, esteem, just due, regard, respect, or prestige,” all of which fit well within the current volume’s use of status and reputation.³⁹ Although many have parsed the idea of honor into ever finer definitions, Here it will be used as Thucydides and his modern students described in the previous sentences—as a reference to status and standing.

Military Status-Seeking

It seems clear that nations and national leaders regularly couch their decisions in terms of status and reputation. However, many might argue the military is different. Are there historical examples of the behavior described here? Public

³⁷ Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, 1–2. David Lloyd George is quoted in “Agadir Crisis: Lloyd George’s Mansion House Speech,” *Times* (UK), 21 July 1911.

³⁸ Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 2018), 109.

³⁹ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1998), 43; Allan Daffoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, “Reputation and Status as Motives for War,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2014): 371–79, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-071112-213421>; and Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, an imprint of Random House, 1996).

choice theory assumes all people to be self-interested; this discussion has done the same, making the further point that the military system as a whole encourages servicemembers to focus on status and reputation. This, then, shapes the decisions that are made at all levels. Does the historical record show that military decision makers are self-interested, and that there are many examples of the dynamics of status and reputation or honor and standing playing out in the echelons below national-level policy makers? Yes, at all levels of the hierarchy. Most importantly for this study, these examples highlight places where the traditional decision-making theories discussed in chapter 1 fall short. They do not coherently explain how or why there should be so many examples of servicemembers at every echelon throughout the hierarchy who appear to deliberately neglect the direction that they have been given, either explicitly or implicitly. Based on the existing models, one must infer either malicious intent or incompetence on the part of each of these actors; Here we instead start by assuming self-interested status and reputation maximization that interacts with military direction as a principal-agent problem. This provides a far superior explanation in most cases. There are many examples of how these dynamics might manifest; indeed, modern research that finds status and reputation to be fundamental human motivations and ubiquitous parts of the human condition necessarily also pushes the theory of status and reputation maximizing to near unfalsifiability. For if status is a drive that shapes all human activity, how could someone divorce it from other motivations or decisions? This will be discussed further in chapter 9. Nonetheless, there are specific areas where we might identify self-interested behavior, in general, and status seeking, in particular.

Throughout the ranks, we should see these dynamics manifest in personal comportment (individuals regularly described as “a singularly ambitious person”), interpersonal relationships, aggressive and obvious management of one’s image or legacy, blatant status-seeking within the hierarchy, and protecting and/or trying to expand organizational status and reputation, among others. Although it is relatively rare for a history book, memoir, or other primary source document to explicitly claim status or reputation as a personal or organizational motivation, given the evidence presented in chapters 3 and 4, it is reasonable to assume that personal and organizational behavior similar to that described above supports the theory. It is entirely possible that some or more of the examples might be subject to debate; for example, historians might viciously argue about Douglas Haig’s “obsessively ambitious” nature

and whether it implies status-seeking more than power-seeking or some other personal motivation.⁴⁰

Can we ever completely tease these motivations apart? The answer is no. Ultimately, it is impossible to know the inner motivation of any person; in many ways, it has become clear that people do not understand their own motivations. Robert Jervis writes that “all we can do is infer operative beliefs from behavior, often by arguing that the explicit reasons given are implausible.”⁴¹ Because of the difficulty inherent in ascertaining motivation, and thus limited utility in “deep diving” into cases in the manner of modern political science, part 2 provides instead what one distinguished professor called “a cloud of examples” instead of focusing on hypothesis testing on one or two specific cases.⁴² As we will see, self-interested status and reputation maximizing recurs repeatedly, regardless of era, level of war, or nationality. In each of the examples discussed here, it drives decisions both down the chain and up it; thus, individuals maximizing their own personal or unit’s status and reputation shape military organizational decisions, not some best rational choice. This continues across time and conflict, although we will also see unique examples of status seeking that are particular to the circumstances of time and place.

“Hard” Strategic Examples

Any discussion of the dynamics this book describes is necessarily difficult. Most importantly, there are many other possible explanations for any of the historical events described here. Of course, this is true for essentially all interpretations of history, but as this discussion approaches many examples from a unique perspective, there is much room for debate and interpretation. Perhaps more difficult, by definition, this theory and framing imputes motives to the subjects used as examples, most of whom have no opportunity to defend themselves. This should make any thinker uncomfortable, as assigning motives to an action without definitive evidence can only ever be the rankest speculation. Nonetheless, the previous chapters show ample evidence to sup-

⁴⁰ J. P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 533.

⁴¹ Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 20.

⁴² Professor Barry Posen once used this term with the author when discussing ways to understand how different writers structure and support their arguments. In modern political science, security studies, and studies of history, this technique has generally fallen out of favor; nonetheless, the author proposes it is the most effective way to discuss the current thesis.

port the motives of status and reputation maximizing. It would be fallacy to proclaim that self-interest, in general, and status and reputation maximization, in particular, are the only possible reasons for the behavior these examples describe, but it is a framing that explains more than it obscures. In each of the examples, the public choice explanation suggests a useful way of understanding events that must be considered as an important part of the inevitably multivariate explanation for any real-world occurrence. Importantly, these cases are clearly far from exhaustive. They do, however, provide a reasonable representative sample.

The difficult explanation for the public choice framing of military behavior should be one in which the threats are existential and the costs of acting in one's own self-interest instead of deliberately prioritizing the collective interest are as high as possible. Of course, this situation is also subject to framing effects; looked at from a different angle, one might advance the claim that existential threats should result in the *most* self-interested behavior. From one perspective, an existential threat might be positive for many decision makers within the military, given that the stakes are much higher and thus allow for much greater reward and status accrual.⁴³

From another perspective, this is an area where the Venn diagram of self-interest and collective interest—personal and national survival—should be almost completely aligned. In this framing, individual behavior would focus entirely on protecting oneself from the perceived threat instead of seeking to maximize status or reputation; it is easy to see how trying to eliminate a collective threat also redounds to one's own benefit. This is reasonable, and the author concedes the point. This discussion will not argue against this perspective in-depth, as even in the most existential of conflicts where leaders were ostensibly making strategy in a rational fashion focused on collective interests, we can find numerous examples of what appears to be obvious self-interested status and reputation-maximizing behavior. Even in the conflicts with the highest stakes, military leaders have often acted in ways that cannot be explained as calculatedly rational.⁴⁴ Instead of explaining their actions as deliberately weighing options and choosing the most effective for a given circumstance, they can better be understood as

⁴³ The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

⁴⁴ Existential conflict does not inherently suggest individuals are at risk of losing their lives, particularly at the highest echelons of strategy making. However, it does suggest personal and collective interests are still likely to align here.

self-interested status and reputation-maximizing behavior, just as the previous chapters predict.⁴⁵

It is important to recognize here, however, that this framing does not suggest different opinions on the most effective strategy for warfighting or other military problems are inherently self-interested. It is obviously possible for different people at any echelon of the hierarchy to disagree in good faith about the best approach for achieving some military aim. However, once a strategy has been decided, for subordinate members of the hierarchy to continue to advocate for and apply resources to any other strategy is by definition the principal-agent problem at work and as likely to be driven by status and reputation maximizing as other motives. As previously mentioned, this should not be understood as inherently negative, only as a normal condition of military action, although most examples here will appear to be detrimental to the overall effort.

It is often difficult to disentangle strategy from policy, and those individuals who make strategy from the strategy itself. The examples will attempt to do so, although there will inevitably be areas where overlaps occur. For example, was the decision for the British to join the Triple Entente as an ally in the First World War a policy decision or a strategic one? Obviously, it was national policy, but very quickly this decision developed in the realm of strategy, as for political reasons the British Expeditionary Force was committed to fight on the European continent—a strategic decision that the British political establishment had not originally envisioned.⁴⁶ Further, one might

⁴⁵ A note about assumptions: this study assumes any and all inter-Service conflicts represent self-interested behavior on the part of at least one of the actors. This does not suggest bad faith on the part of the Services involved, although that has often been the case. Just as often, however, Services legitimately believe their position to be the best way to ensure national security. Although the reasoning can be tautological (national security is important, a specific capability or way of warfighting is the best way to ensure national security, this Service is the best option to provide this capability, hence national security is best supported by this Service, and therefore this Service should receive all available resources), there is no doubt that different Services have often argued in good faith. This does not obviate the fact, however, that it is essentially impossible for these arguments to be completely correct, and thus these disputes will be considered self-interested action on the part of the Services. Additionally, personality conflicts are a normal part of the human condition; however, the author assumes personality conflicts where a subordinate deliberately undercuts their chain of command to assume their position can be explained as status conflicts more than pure dislike or disagreement most of the time.

⁴⁶ Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1, *To Arms* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 198–204.

understand strategic decisions as almost inextricably conjoined with their progenitors. For example, Winston Churchill will always be associated with the strategic decision to force the Dardanelles that eventually became the Gallipoli campaign. In some ways this is semantics, for as discussed in chapter 4, the status and reputation dynamics at the highest levels of organizations often align exactly with the leaders at the top. Nonetheless, if there appears to be a useful distinction between the two, the given example will articulate it. As a general rule, however, in almost every major war for the last 100 years, there are multitudes of examples of the principal-agent problem that manifests through self-interested status and reputation maximizing behavior at the strategic level. We will not have to look far, and will not have to exert much effort to see evidence of this.

World War I

Although for most belligerents the stakes in World War I (WWI) were extreme, status-seeking and reputation management at the highest levels appears to have been quite common. The generals of WWI already suffer from the post hoc caricatures drawn by many who were disillusioned with the war: the *donkeys* of the “lions led by donkeys” pejorative.⁴⁷ This is an unfair characterization. The generals of the Great War were far from stupid and sought novel solutions to exceptionally difficult problems. However, they also showed all the hallmarks of the self-interested, status-maximizing theory laid out in part 1.

In the early 1900s, a status-driven worldview was a normal way to understand life. Indeed, like their societies at large, many of the Great War leaders at the top of their respective organizations saw the world in fundamentally Social Darwinist terms. Germany’s Helmut von Moltke (the younger) and Franz Graf Conrad von Hötzendorf of Austria explicitly believed they were playing a part in what was essentially a national-level competition for dominance, and the general intellectual milieu of the time was rife with this sort of thought. One historian has described the period before World War I as “an age that viewed international politics as a Darwinian struggle in which

⁴⁷ The earliest attribution of this term applied to World War I generals appears in Evelyn Blücher von Wahlstatt, *An English Wife in Berlin* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), 211.

only the fittest of peoples would find security and prosper.”⁴⁸ Von Hötzendorf was especially focused on national status and dominance. He was extremely concerned with the growth of Serbia and Slavic nationalism, seeing national competition as a zero-sum game for status and prestige. Indeed, in 1912, von Hötzendorf wrote to the Archduke Franz Ferdinand that “the loss of territory and prestige resulting from Serbia’s ascendancy ‘would relegate the Monarchy to the status of a small power’.”⁴⁹ As Richard Ned Lebow describes, “the balance of power was also problematic in 1914 because of the motives of Austrian, Russian, and German leaders. [They] were keen to uphold the honor of the empire and believed that any moderate response to the assassinations [of Archduke Franz Ferdinand] would undermine its standing.”⁵⁰

This Social Darwinist outlook was not applied purely in thinking about nations and national prestige either. This way of thinking also provided a veneer of legitimacy for the sort of open ambition and status striving that today’s culture would view with distaste.⁵¹ Carl von Clausewitz wrote nearly a hundred years before the Great War that “so far as the commander-in-chief is concerned, we may well ask whether history has ever known a great general who was not ambitious; whether, indeed, such a figure is conceivable.”⁵² As the war developed, there would be ample evidence of extreme ambition on

⁴⁸ John H. Maurer, “Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Strategy of Sea Power,” in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, 169. For von Moltke, see Correlli Barnett, *The Sword-Bearers: Supreme Command in the First World War* (New York: William Morrow, 1964), 35; for Conrad, see Lawrence Sondhaus, *Franz Conrad Von Hötzendorf: Architect of the Apocalypse* (Boston, MA: Humanities Press, an imprint of Brill Academic Publishers, 2000), 82–85; for a discussion of Social Darwinism before World War I, see Paul Crook, *Darwinism, War and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the “Origin of Species” to the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511521348>; James Joll and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 4th ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 300–12; and Francis J. Gavin, “Unspoken Assumptions,” *Texas National Security Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 3–6, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/46147>.

⁴⁹ Conrad von Hötzendorf, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (n.p.: Rosetta Books, 2014), 6.

⁵⁰ Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 450.

⁵¹ For the seminal treatment of Social Darwinism in American thought, see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512816976>. Although this applies specifically to American thought, it also provides a useful foundation for understanding the ways Social Darwinism manifested in the years before World War I.

⁵² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 105.

the part of commanding generals who sought the highest status, as well as a huge number of examples of the sort of “palace intrigue” among staff officers that one would expect to see at the top of a hierarchy in a world where each individual seeks to maximize their personal prestige.

The German side experienced a series of such status competitions during the first years of the war as senior officers jostled with each other to climb to the top of the hierarchy. This started in 1914, with General Erich von Falkenhayn working toward, and eventually succeeding in, deposing von Moltke as leader of the war effort after the collapse of the Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen’s planned invasion of France (and von Moltke’s psychological breakdown). Described by one observer as “a heartless, ambitious climber, who stepped indifferently over corpses in pursuit of his goal,” Falkenhayn maneuvered into position as the leader of the German war effort pursuing his personal goal: to accrue the highest possible status for himself, for the German Army, and for Germany.⁵³ In his memoirs of decisions made between 1914 and 1916, Falkenhayn also described how he made decisions not with the military utility of an action in mind, but instead focusing on national and organizational status and reputation. He constantly sought to ensure that “the very sensitive feelings of the Austro-Hungarian G.H.Q [General Headquarters] and the Austro-Hungarian Government had not to be hurt, nor their reputation diminished.”⁵⁴ In one sense, this makes total political sense. However, protecting the perceived status of an ally does not comport well with most military-focused decision-making theories from chapter 1.

Later, Falkenhayn fell from Kaiser Wilhelm’s favor, losing both status and reputation after the general failure of the Battle of Verdun. When this happened, he suffered much the same fate as Moltke before him, although Falkenhayn did not have a psychological break but went on to distinguish himself in the eastern theater of the war. This time, the deponents were Generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, a team of serial self-promoters who “finally maneuvered Falkenhayn out of office” as their “rivalry became increasingly bitter.” In this episode, Hindenburg became “the first Prussian theater commander in history to demand the removal of

⁵³ Karl von Sturckh, quoted in Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 29.

⁵⁴ Gen [Erich] von Falkenhayn, *The German General Staff and Its Decisions, 1914–1916* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1920), 171.

a chief of the General Staff and threaten to resign to back up his demand.”⁵⁵ It is possible that this was a cold-blooded, rational demand for the good of the war effort, although the science of status and reputation would suggest otherwise.

Both Hindenburg and Ludendorff showed the sort of preoccupation with status and reputation that this book claims we should often expect to see. Described by many as the “brains of the combination,” historians and contemporaries alike agree that Ludendorff in particular was ambitious and “not above disloyalty to his superior [Falkenhayn], and tried to sway the imperial regime in favor of an Eastern offensive,” which was Ludendorff’s preference but counter to the strategy Falkenhayn directed early in the war.⁵⁶ Similarly, historian Nick Lloyd explains how, in 1915 in a perfect manifestation of the principal-agent problem, “showing their characteristic independence and single-mindedness, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were unimpressed by Falkenhayn’s strategic judgment and continued with their plans anyway.”⁵⁷ Perhaps most telling, even Ludendorff’s wife—not exactly a military contemporary—described him as focusing on the conflict with his leadership, writing “I can still remember Ludendorff’s letters at that time. They were nothing but one long complaint against Falkenhayn.”⁵⁸ Although personality conflicts are a normal element in the human condition, a personality conflict where a subordinate focuses almost exclusively on the goal of removing their leader is far better described as a status conflict, most often one where a conflict over the “dominance” pathway to status applies. Finally, Ludendorff showed a preoccupation with attributing motivations of status and prestige to others, writing in one case how General Paul von Hindenburg decided on promotions based on “holding [their] manly and upright character in high esteem,” for example.⁵⁹ In another case, he described how the Austrian high

⁵⁵ David T. Zabecki, *The Generals’ War: Operational Level Command on the Western Front in 1918* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 71. Ludendorff in particular was a “violently aggressive careerist.” See Barnett, *The Sword-Bearers*, 271.

⁵⁶ D. J. Goodspeed, *Ludendorff: Genius of World War I* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); and Williamson Murray, “Ludendorff: Tactical Genius, Strategic Fool,” *Military History* 25, no. 4 (October 2008): 42–49.

⁵⁷ Nick Lloyd, *The Eastern Front: A History of the Great War, 1914–1918* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2024), 67.

⁵⁸ Mararethe Ludendorff, *My Married Life with Ludendorff* (London: Hutchinson, 1929), 143.

⁵⁹ Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story, August 1914–November 1918: The Great War from the Siege of Liège to the Signing of the Armistice as Viewed from the Grand Headquarters of the German Army*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1919), 193.

command refused to grant the German leadership control of its army due to concerns for perception and prestige.⁶⁰

Not to be outdone were the allies of the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia). As Alistair Horne memorably described, “isolated in its palace at Chantilly, G.Q.G. (Grand Quartier Général, the general headquarters of the French Army) lived amid an atmosphere of back-stabbing intrigue reminiscent of the court of Louis XV at Versailles.”⁶¹ Indeed, even in his published memoirs, French commander in chief General Joseph-Jacques-Césaire Joffre included correspondence with the minister of war, Adolphe M. Messimy, where they discuss “men who will spit out their venom against you and against me” in reference to previously relieved commanders.⁶² Deserved or not, reputation management was clearly a concern on the minds of those who directed the French military strategy. Joffre described making many decisions with prestige at the forefront of his mind, describing how in one instance he relieved a general because he had “weakened the prestige of the high command,” while in others he described how the loss of a battle was important because “a blow had been dealt to our prestige,” and in still other places he wrote about the import of personal prestige in staff negotiations with allies.⁶³

By 1916, the relative status of French leaders continued to ebb and flow with the army’s battlefield fortunes, and the maneuvering of staff officers who supported the leaders at the top of the hierarchy—always seeking to build personal and organizational status—was unflinching. Historians have often framed Joffre as complacent, unflappable (implying that he was stupid or incurious), or without ambition. Although there might be some truth to these assertions, they are also only partly correct. Joffre was far from complacent when managing his personal reputation, and despite the common depiction that he was slow thinking or aloof, he was skilled at the sort of bureaucratic knife fighting common in the French Army of the time. He ably sought to develop and retain his personal prestige.⁶⁴ Without question, Joffre knew

⁶⁰ Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story, August 1914–November 1918*, 259.

⁶¹ Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 23.

⁶² Joseph Joffre, *The Memoirs of Marshal Joffre*, vol. 1, trans. Col T. Bentley Mott (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1932), 184.

⁶³ Joseph Joffre, *The Memoirs of Marshal Joffre*, vol. 2, trans. Col T. Bentley Mott (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1932), 375, 535, 422.

⁶⁴ Lloyd, *The Western Front*, 156–57; and Horne, *The Price of Glory*, 125. In an excellent example of this, Horne alleges that one of the reasons Joffre sent his deputy to the site of the German attack on Verdun in 1916 was to ensure responsibility for the debacle would rest on someone else’s shoulders if the battle resulted in catastrophe.

the score. In his memoirs, he directly attributes his ability to coordinate and manage the French armies and those of his allies to the “prestige ensuing from the Victory of the Marne.”⁶⁵ It is clear that, to Joffre, prestige was not only a critical factor, but something that was to be developed and maintained as much as possible.

British leaders showed similar dynamics. Douglas Haig might be a poster child for the public choice understanding of military leadership. In many historians’ assessments, he devoted enormous effort to political infighting, and one of his biographers has written of Haig’s “scheming and intrigue,” while another characterized him as “obsessively ambitious.”⁶⁶ There are two versions of his personal diary and letters: the one he published after the war with an eye toward burnishing his postwar reputation; and the one that he mailed to his wife in sections, with an eye toward allowing her to selectively release portions of it to influence British leadership on his behalf.⁶⁷ Additionally, he tended to focus on the well-being of his own command at the expense of adjacent units; and in a perfect example of the principal-agent problem, he showed “a willingness to flagrantly disobey orders, particularly if he thought obeying them would endanger his forces.”⁶⁸ Finally, Haig’s published diary and letters show multiple occasions where telegrams, dispatches, and orders were manipulated by interested parties to ensure that only information favorable to the sender was broadcast.⁶⁹ As historian Gerard J. DeGroot described, Haig’s “careful cultivation of image reaped benefits.”⁷⁰ This is common, and a theme we will return to often in this and later chapters.

The British Royal Navy experienced its own share of palace intrigue and self-interested status burnishing. An obvious example lies in the fights about the Dardanelles operation, followed by efforts on all sides to transfer responsibility and salvage reputation after it became clear that it was a significant

⁶⁵ Joffre, *The Memoirs of Marshal Joffre*, vol. 2, 537.

⁶⁶ Gerard J. DeGroot, “Ambition, Duty, and Doctrine: Douglas Haig’s Rise to High Command,” in Brian Bond and Nigel Cave, eds., *Haig: A Re-Appraisal 80 Years On* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2009); and Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War*.

⁶⁷ Sheffield and Bourne, “Introduction,” 2–4.

⁶⁸ Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, 533–35.

⁶⁹ For example, see Haig, *Douglas Haig*, 450, 453.

⁷⁰ DeGroot, “Ambition, Duty, and Doctrine.”

failure.⁷¹ We will discuss Gallipoli more in subsequent paragraphs. Even more glaring than that operation was the battle for reputation and status after the Battle of Jutland. Almost as soon as the smoke from the battle cleared—literally and figuratively—the two most well-known commanders in the battle, Sir John Rushworth Jellicoe and Sir David Beatty, began jockeying to protect their own reputations; an effort that, in this case, would prove to be largely a zero-sum competition.⁷² Jellicoe, for his part, published two memoirs and had a coterie of defenders outside the scope of the British Admiralty. Beatty, on the other hand, remained within the Admiralty as First Sea Lord during and after the war. While in that position, he deliberately changed reports on the Battle of Jutland produced outside his office, forced the inclusion of information that bolstered his personal claims, and generally sought to influence the official and unofficial narratives of the battle in his favor. Indeed, the director of navigation at the time and official Admiralty chronicler, Captain J. E. T. Harper wrote that “it was transparent from the day Lord Beatty assumed office as First Sea Lord that attempts were being made to neutralize the effect of the plain, unvarnished, chronological record of the facts.” After completion of this report, Beatty ordered post hoc additions and forced the inclusion of minutiae that did not add to the report but that he seemingly felt bolstered his own narrative of the battle.⁷³

Even the nascent U.S. Army was not immune to status competition within and between armies. General John J. Pershing is the primary example of this on the American side as commander of the American Expeditionary Forces. As historian Joseph T. Glatthaar writes, “[Secretary of War Newton] Baker assured Pershing that his authority would be supreme. Pershing took it to heart.”⁷⁴ Pershing fought the other Allied supreme commanders to retain a separate American Army instead of amalgamating into each of their armies even though this would have paid obvious dividends to the collective war effort, describing this conflict and his insistence on keeping the U.S. Army

⁷¹ For a gentle treatment of these arguments, see John Arbuthnot Fisher, *Memories* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919); and Winston S. Churchill gave a speech after the operation that resulted in his removal from the Admiralty titled “I Have Done My Best.” See Winston Churchill, *The Speeches of Winston Churchill* (London: Penguin, 1990), 60.

⁷² Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (London: John Murray, 1996), 568–71.

⁷³ Stephen Roskill and Eric Grove, *Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty: The Last Naval Hero—An Intimate Biography* (Havertown, PA: Pen & Sword Books, 2018), 322–39.

⁷⁴ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The American Military: A Concise History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 56.

independent in his diary.⁷⁵ The French and British prime ministers, Georges Clemenceau and David Lloyd George, were “exasperated with Pershing’s intransigence” in this regard, as it was clear that Pershing’s efforts were not to support the greater war effort but were instead to protect his and his army’s own interests.⁷⁶ Douglas Haig was even more frustrated, writing in his diary that “Pershing was very obstinate, and stupid . . . [and] did not seem to realize the urgency of the situation.”⁷⁷

Not only did Pershing seek to defend the prestige of the U.S. Army by refusing to integrate under other nations’ flags, but he also created problems with his unwillingness to learn from the French and British experience of the previous years. He insisted on outdated “open tactics” because of an unfounded belief in two status-related ideas: first, the superiority of American troops—the “individual doughboy with a rifle.” Pershing believed his American troops were better than the Europeans, and his unwillingness to listen to the experienced Allied leadership was likely the cause of large numbers of American dead and wounded.⁷⁸ Second, his belief in the superiority of an idea that open tactics were somehow better than the carnage of the trenches. His devotion to the status he associated with this idea surely hurt the war effort. Some contemporary observers also claimed that he pushed for unnecessary offensive actions to accrue status to the American Army directly, of course redounding to himself as its leader as well.⁷⁹

Strategic-level status competitions were not found only among and between the individuals at the top of the World War I bureaucracies however. One of the most interesting ways status and reputation management manifested in this war was the way many senior leaders sought to manage the com-

⁷⁵ John J. Pershing, *John J. Pershing Papers: Diaries, Notebooks, and Address Books*, –1925; Diaries; Set 1; 1917, May 7–1918, Sept. 1. May 7, –September 1, 1918, 1917, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁷⁶ Ultimately, he provided troops to support many different formations to prevent catastrophe during the German 1918 offensives. See Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box*, 743–44. For “exasperated with intransigence,” see Zabecki, *The Generals’ War*, 67.

⁷⁷ Haig, *Douglas Haig*, 409.

⁷⁸ Timothy K. Nenninger, “‘Unsystematic as a Mode of Command’: Commanders and the Process of Command in the American Expeditionary Forces, 1917–1918,” *Journal of Military History* 64, no. 3 (2000): 739–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/120867>; Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box*, 620–21; and John H. Eggers, *General Pershing’s Story of the American Army in France* (New York: Herzig, McLean, 1919), 8.

⁷⁹ For discussion of unnecessary employment, see Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911–1918* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924), 828. For deliberate placement of American forces into battle to “prove they could fight,” see Lloyd, *The Western Front*, 430.

position of their forces. Morris Janowitz wrote that, “although personal and career experiences in time of war influence their political behavior, military leaders are also profoundly concerned with maintaining the prerogatives of their organization and their branch of service.”⁸⁰ This can be seen most clearly in Haig’s protection of the cavalry arm of the British Army; despite its obvious unfitness for use on the western front and seeming eclipse by technology, Haig continued to support, defend, and extol the virtues of the cavalry until the end of the war.

It is, of course, certainly possible that Haig had weighed each option available and simply decided that the cavalry was the best and most useful formation for the situation (though which one, exactly, is immaterial). Conversely, it is more likely that as a cavalry officer he identified with this branch that had for so long been of the highest status in the British Army and sought to keep it there. Indeed, Gerard DeGroot writes that “Haig’s deepest devotion was to the cavalry.”⁸¹ It is entirely possible that both are true, with Haig’s unconscious belief in the preeminence of the cavalry arm informing his desire to continue using it even when it was manifestly ill-suited to the ways it might have been used on the western front. As J. P. Harris wrote in *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, “the most conservative aspect of Haig’s military thought was defence of the *importance* of cavalry.”⁸² British Prime Minister David Lloyd George later wrote that although he “express[ed] my doubts as to whether cavalry could ever operate successfully on a front bristling . . . with barbed wire and machine guns, both Generals [Joffre and Haig] fell ecstatically on me.”⁸³ The idea of cavalry as the preeminent branch is one that proved exceptionally difficult to eliminate, even after the conclusion of the war.

Historian Tim Travers has written how “the British Army was actually fighting two wars during 1914–1918, a hidden internal war and an external ‘real war’.” The hidden war he describes was one where the British Army prized the status of specific ideas and attitudes or what he characterizes as “attitudes that were primarily social,” and thus it could not or would not change

⁸⁰ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 285.

⁸¹ DeGroot, “Ambition, Duty, and Doctrine.”

⁸² Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, 46–47. Emphasis added.

⁸³ In this case, ecstatically is used to imply anger and aggressive argument, not excitement like the modern colloquial usage. David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 2 (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), 542.

its understanding of modern warfare.⁸⁴ This was far from unique to the British Army. A further example might be the almost unbelievable refusal of the British Admiralty to conduct convoy operations to mitigate the German submarine threat. This was justified in many ways and likely for psychological reasons, as Robert Jervis has ably described.⁸⁵ A critical psychological reason that certainly affected the convoy system and other strategic decisions during the Great War was the status of *ideas*, as Travers describes above.

The British Royal Navy was almost obsessively focused on offensive action, and the convoy system and submarine hunting were thought to be primarily defensive in nature. Hence, even though convoy activity might have been more useful than other forms of submarine hunting, the Royal Navy resisted testing it as a possibility in favor of its preferred offensive actions.⁸⁶ Indeed, despite extremely healthy public encouragement from his civilian leadership, Admiral Jellicoe, who was now leading the Royal Navy as First Sea Lord, nonetheless fought the idea. He described the Royal Navy's mission in 1917 as attaining control of the sea by ensuring "the enemy's naval forces both above and below water had to be destroyed or effectually masked."⁸⁷ He, and the Admiralty as a whole, remained wedded to the idea of offensive action. This was not because it was working; clearly, it was not. It was because the thought of such defensive action as convoys was essentially unthinkable due to its low status. British Prime Minister Lloyd George claimed in his memoir that the only way to change the mind of the Admiralty in this case was to literally remove its head. In 1917, he appointed Sir Eric Campbell Geddes as First Lord of the Admiralty with a mandate to remove Jellicoe.⁸⁸ Interestingly, this, too might have been motivated by self-interest, as some have alleged the removal was a combination of palace intrigue, personal conflict, and possibly an attempt by Douglas Haig to deflect the prime minister's displeasure from himself.⁸⁹

A similar manifestation of status competition between ideas and their

⁸⁴ Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War, 1900–1918* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), 252.

⁸⁵ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 2d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 134, 162.

⁸⁶ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 162.

⁸⁷ John Rushworth Jellicoe, *The Crisis of the Naval War* (London: Cassell, 1920), 169.

⁸⁸ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 3 (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934), 164.

⁸⁹ J. Allan C. Macfarlane, "A Naval Travesty: The Dismissal of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, 1917" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2014), 126–50.

proponents can be seen at Verdun in the months before the famous battle. The French obsession with offensive action in the early years of the twentieth century has been well documented.⁹⁰ After the early battles of the war, particularly at the Belgian forts of Liege and almost in spite of the horrendous casualties in the first battles, the idea of fortifications and defensive activity actually *lost* status in the French Grand Quartier Général, with the *Grand-maisonites* (disciples of the French cult of the offensive), “rapidly exploit[ing] these disasters to their own advantage.”⁹¹ Indeed, in the months before the battle, the French deliberately denuded the fort of many of its armaments to the point that General Frédéric-Georges Herr, commanding general at Verdun, claimed “at every demand I addressed them [Grand Quartier Général] for reinforcement in artillery, they replied with the *withdrawal* of two batteries or two and a half batteries.”⁹² Herr later described how French forces were unprepared—and one of the forts at Verdun completely undefended—because the Grand Quartier Général did not believe the Germans would attack there.⁹³ In the case of Verdun, the status of an idea for offense over all else was nearly decisive. Because the French leadership irrationally privileged this idea, they nearly lost Verdun.

Deliberate strategic decisions that informed the overall course of the war were made with a keen eye toward status as well. Verdun provides one of the best examples of this dynamic. Indeed, the entire German strategy for initiating the battle was based on the idea of status. In this case, it was to use status dynamics against the enemy, where “calculation was that the lightning capture of such a *symbolic strategic point*—the fortifications of Verdun—would compel the French to try to retake it and then the German defenders, by holding the line, would impose huge losses on the enemy and systematically wear him down.”⁹⁴ In the view of the chief of the German General Staff, Falkenhayn, “the place itself mattered not to him but to the French. . . . [and they] would shed so much blood by holding Verdun or so

⁹⁰ Michael Howard, “Men Against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, 510–26. Interestingly, Margaret MacMillan recently argued that this obsession with offensive action was in part driven by an upper-class effort to retain social status within European societies. See Margaret MacMillan, “Strategy, War Plans, and the First World War,” in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, 478.

⁹¹ Horne, *The Price of Glory*, 49.

⁹² Herr, quoted in Horne, *The Price of Glory*, 50–51.

⁹³ Frédéric-Georges Herr, *L'artillerie: ce qu'elle a été, ce qu'elle est, ce qu'elle doit être* [Artillery: what it was, what it is, what it must be] (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1923), 46–50.

⁹⁴ Leonhard, *Pandora's Box*, 391. Emphasis added.

much prestige by abandoning it they would lose their ability or their will to continue the war.”⁹⁵

Although there were many flaws in the planning and execution of the battle, in this regard it worked at least at first. As Alistair Horne describes, “Above all, in formulating his decision, [General Noël Édouard] de Castelnau [ranking French general on the scene, as Joffre’s chief of staff in 1916] was influenced by psychological imponderables. As Colonel de Thomasson, one of the more levelheaded French writers on Verdun, remarks: ‘sometimes sentiment provokes a courage which could not be otherwise inspired by cold reason’.”⁹⁶ Later in the battle, the Germans also found themselves hopelessly enmeshed there. Attempting to “bleed the French white” by using their focus on prestige against them, the Germans were stuck in what historian Paul Jankowski describes as “the prestige trap.” Once the battle was joined, individual, organizational, and national status became just as much a motivating factor for the German armies as the French.⁹⁷ Far from unusual, this focus on a specific location not because of military necessity but due to the status of the place occurred in many locations during World War I.⁹⁸ This prestige trap, a military application of the sunk cost fallacy, is discouragingly common even in modern conflicts such as the 2023 Battle of Bakhmut (chapter 2).

A second example of a strategic operation based largely on ideas of maximizing status and prestige is the Dardanelles campaign as it was originally conceived. The Admiralty, led by Winston Churchill, convinced themselves in the lead up to this campaign of two important ideas that revolved around status. First, Constantinople was so important and prestigious a target that even threatening it with naval forces would induce a revolution in the Ottoman Empire, and that seizing an objective of this importance—status—would be such a critical blow to the enemy that it could result in major, even war-changing, gains. This idea was inextricably tied to Churchill and

⁹⁵ Jankowski, *Verdun*, 27. There is much argument among historians regarding Falkenhayn’s intentions. He left little in the way of contemporaneous written record, and he died in 1922. However, in his memoir, he claims he intended to use the prestige of Verdun to make the French Army “bleed to death,” and the author takes his claim at face value in this case, while recognizing that there are many competing ideas about it. See von Falkenhayn, *The German General Staff and Its Decisions, 1914–1916*, 249.

⁹⁶ Horne, *The Price of Glory*, 131.

⁹⁷ Jankowski, *Verdun*, 88–108.

⁹⁸ For a less well known eastern front example of a similar tendency, reference the continued Austro-Hungarian efforts to retake the fortress city of Przemyśl, Poland, even *after* it had been rendered militarily useless. Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 111.

the Royal Navy's personal and organizational status: it offered them an opportunity to gain a huge strategic success without the participation of the British Army, which was shouldering the heaviest load of warfighting at the time. Although it is impossible to say with certainty that this was a key motivator, it is also impossible to rule it out as at least a subconscious motivation. Second, an equally pernicious assumption was that the British were fundamentally better—higher status—than the Turks. David French describes it as “the conviction held by most Englishmen that the Turk was inherently inferior to the white man.”⁹⁹ These two ideas combined to lead to one of the most spectacular failures of World War I: the Gallipoli campaign.¹⁰⁰ In fact, not only did these ideas lead to the campaign, but also to the continuation of the operation once it was evident that the theory of victory underpinning it was no longer a possibility. Jörn Leonhard explains how “the role of military prestige in the dominant thinking [about the Dardanelles] prevented an end to the operation.”¹⁰¹

Individual, personal, and status dynamics also played a part in the strategic decision making of the war, sometimes to an astonishing degree. Some of these have already been described, such as Douglas Haig's “obsessive ambition.” An example of two additional types of status-seeking and reputation management can be seen in another individual who had a significant effect on the war: Franz Graf Conrad von Hötzendorf, the chief of the General Staff of the Austro-Hungarian Army and Navy in the years leading up to and the early years of World War I. Notably, von Hötzendorf is an outstanding exemplar

⁹⁹ David French, “The Origins of the Dardanelles Campaign Reconsidered,” *History* 68, no. 223 (1983): 210–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229X.1983.tb01405.x>.

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, status and reputation dynamics were at least partially responsible for the Ottomans entering the war in the first place. In *The Status Game*, Will Storr describes how humiliation is the sudden loss of status and should be considered “uniquely catastrophic.” He goes on to argue that this emotion scales up to the national level and can motivate national actions. In the early part of World War I, the British provoked and humiliated the Ottoman Empire by seizing two battleships that had been built in England and already paid for by the Ottomans. Although clearly not the only cause for the Ottoman entry into the war, Storr's analysis suggests that this status dynamic played at least some small part. On the opposite side, the Germans provided the Ottomans with two battleships as a replacement, and the way this incident developed also created similar dynamics on the British side. As Hew Strachan writes regarding this circumstance, “Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, felt humiliated and treated the Turks as enemies henceforth.” See Will Storr, *The Status Game* (London: William Collins, 2021), 66; Peter Hart, *Gallipoli* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7–9; and Strachan, *The First World War*, 108.

¹⁰¹ Leonhard, *Pandora's Box*, 240.

of someone who deliberately and effectively sought to manage his reputation and perceived status in the future. Indeed, Wolfram Dornik described von Hötendorf as “shaping his own image for posterity.”¹⁰²

A much stranger episode involves one of the primary motivations behind von Hötendorf’s advocacy for starting the conflict that became World War I. Although it seems almost beyond belief, he hoped the war would help him accrue sufficient status to obviate Austro-Hungarian societal constraints that prevented him from courting a married woman. As Christopher Clark describes in *The Sleepwalkers*, “He even came to see war as a means of gaining possession of Gina. Only as a victorious war-hero, Conrad believed, would he be able to sweep aside the social obstacles and the scandal attaching to a marriage with a prominent divorcee. He fantasized in a letter to Gina about returning from a ‘Balkan war’ draped in the laurels of triumph, throwing caution to the winds and making her his wife.”¹⁰³ It is not hyperbole to suggest that a major factor behind Austria-Hungary’s most senior officer advocating a world war was to gain personal glory that would allow him to accrue sufficient social status to marry a woman he fancied. Self-interested decision making paired with status maximization is a far more useful lens through which to view this episode than any of the many permutations of rational choice decision models.

Perhaps World War I was an anomaly. Is it possible that there was an excess of these dynamics at the strategic level in the Great War because it represents a relic of a bygone age, where Social Darwinism, individual social status, and class divisions mattered far more than later wars? In this line of thinking, we should ask if leaders and generals of the Great War put more stock in honor, prestige, and reputation than the far more pragmatic and modern leaders of World War II. The answer, of course, is absolutely not. Leaders of various periods may represent their thinking differently because of the conventions of their time and place, but the basic idea is universal. People

¹⁰² Wolfram Dornik, “Conrad von Hötendorf and the ‘Smoking Gun’: A Biographical Examination of Responsibility and Traditions of Violence against Civilians in the Habsburg Army,” in *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War I*, ed. Günter Bischof, Ferdinand Karhofer, and Samuel R. Williamson (New Orleans, LA: University of New Orleans Press, 2014), 55–75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1n2txft.6>.

¹⁰³ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014). This is also described in depth by his wife, the aforementioned Gina, in her memoir. See Gina Agujari-Kárász Conrad von Hötendorf, *Mein Leben mit Conrad von Hötendorf* (Leipzig, Wien: Grethlein, 1935), 12.

are self-interested, and people in the military maximize status and reputation, particularly their own or the organization with which they identify.

World War II

World War II is the second difficult example that should be characterized by altruistic, collective-focused decision making. Despite its existential nature, World War I had its share of self-interested decision making at the strategic level. These decisions drove everything from strategy to leadership to the management, development, and employment of different capabilities. World War II has at least as much, if not more. World War II was in many ways a more complex conflict. The alliances were farther reaching, coalitions were both larger and yet worked together more closely, and the size of the conflict—geographically and by sheer number of participants—was significantly larger. As a result, public choice theory would suggest that we should expect to see *more* self-interested decision making, even though the stakes of this conflict were arguably greater than those of World War I.

Just as the military leadership of the different belligerent nations in World War I routinely made decisions to benefit themselves or their preferred organizations, the same dynamic took place in World War II. The most important of these examples is the strategic coordination of the war between the British and American staffs. Although many, if not most, strategic decisions taken by the two nations were de facto or explicit policy decisions finally decided by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Churchill, these decisions were nonetheless driven by the planning, discussion, and fighting that took place between the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Writing of these dynamics in his book *Masters and Commanders*, historian Andrew Roberts argues that “although it is taken for granted that emotion, persuasiveness, and charisma have a large part to play in politics, the same is not generally thought to be true of grand strategy.” He goes on to claim that “the two political Masters and two military Commanders of the Western powers who ultimately took these decisions together were flesh and blood, working under tremendous stress, and prey to the *same subjective influences as everyone else*.”¹⁰⁴

This infighting and jockeying between the leaders of the war was characterized by status competition between the two nations’ staffs, between the military leadership of the combined war effort, and regarding the relative

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West, 1941–1945* (New York: Harper, 2009), 5. Emphasis added.

status of each nation's armed forces. Roberts shows how, in many cases, strategic decisions were neither made to support the optimal military strategy, whatever that might seem to be, nor did subordinate commanders and staffs recognize the strategy decided on by senior levels and work to best achieve it. They instead advocated for what they perceived to be their own interests. Many major decisions in this war, like the previous, were made to increase the relative prestige of an individual commander, defend the status of national forces, or prevent loss of face. In his unpublished wartime diary, future Supreme Allied Commander in Europe Dwight D. Eisenhower described the planning that took place between British and American staffs, writing that "most advice is, of course, colored by individuals who subconsciously think of their own power or opportunities for advancement."¹⁰⁵ Eisenhower certainly understood the dynamics described in these pages.

One might argue that this sort of infighting and constant maneuvering for relative status is not only common between coalitions, but that it is to be expected. Since each nation has its own strategic interests, they should pursue them even to the detriment of their allies. This not only proves the point but strengthens it: if nations should be expected to do this, why would we not assume that individuals who have far less abstract interests at stake would act the same? Nonetheless, the question remains: Can we show examples of status competition *within* the different belligerents' strategic-level leadership of World War II?

Just as the leaders of World War I often degraded or at least neglected the collective good in favor of their self-interested decisions, the leaders of World War II did the same. Perhaps the place where we might expect to see the least amount of status competition would be the leadership of the Axis powers. Indeed, Nazi Germany is often framed as a one-dimensional state in the thrall of Adolf Hitler, and rarely do popular histories of the Pacific War look within the black box of the Imperial Japanese government. As this argument goes, unlike the messy and fractured nature of Allied command, the autocratic nature of these two nations should have mitigated the sort of self-interested decision making that public choice theory suggests we should see.¹⁰⁶ This is

¹⁰⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry C. Butcher, "Personal and Official Diary of Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower," *Diaries of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, July 1942, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁶ Similar claims are often made by pundits discussing the ongoing (at the time of this writing) Russia-Ukraine conflict and Vladimir Putin's influence.

wrong. The strategic level infighting of the *Wehrmacht* is legendary. Historian Geoffrey Megargee describes how almost the entire command structure of the German military was focused on infighting and turf wars; whether in field armies or the German high command, the priority was far less about winning the war and much more about influence and stature.¹⁰⁷ This is true whether we look at generals like Wilhelm Keitel, Alfred Jodl, and Walter Warlimont, who constantly jostled with each other and the other generals of the *Wehrmacht* trying to acquire increased status with the only person who they believed mattered—Hitler—or more independent actors like Generals Heinz Guderian and Erich von Manstein, whose self-serving (and popular) memoirs demonstrate status-seeking behavior at every echelon and show very careful cultivation of their reputations after the war was lost.¹⁰⁸

Some—perhaps most tellingly, Manstein and Guderian—argue that the real problem was less the generals and more Hitler; in this version of the story, the Nazi generals were actually just restraining his worst impulses. This claim does not hold up to close scrutiny, although many certainly disobeyed and actively undercut Hitler's directives when it was convenient. The fights between Hitler and his top generals might be better understood as a strategic-level manifestation of the principal-agent problem, where unless forced to obey they would regularly attempt to do much the opposite of what Hitler directed and even with specific direction they would seek to circumvent or interpret orders as they saw fit. Manstein and Guderian each describe numerous occasions where they disregarded or sought to execute efforts that were essentially the opposite of Hitler's direction. This was quite common within the *Wehrmacht*.¹⁰⁹

Perhaps the best example of self-interested decision making in the highest echelons of the Nazi military apparatus can be seen in Hermann Göring, whose personal status-seeking behavior and attempts to accrue status and maintain the reputation of the *Luftwaffe* were responsible for some of Germany's worst blunders during the war. Beyond his outlandish status-seeking

¹⁰⁷ Geoffrey Preaut Megargee, "Triumph of the Null: The War within the German High Command, 1933–1945" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1998), 600–3.

¹⁰⁸ Walter Gorlitz, "Keitel, Jodl and Warlimont," in *Hitler's Generals*, ed. Correlli Barnett (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989); Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001); and Erich Manstein, *Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Manstein, *Lost Victories*; and Guderian, *Panzer Leader*.

presentation that included “garish and outlandish uniforms accessorized with furs and braids and bizarre medals and decorations for contrived pseudo-accomplishments,” Göring’s status focus also hurt the Nazi war effort.¹¹⁰ His constant maneuvering within the bureaucracy in search of greater personal and organizational status was one major reason for the convoluted and byzantine German arms development industry.¹¹¹ His status-seeking also was responsible for duplicative efforts like the creation of *tank divisions* within the air force—what one prominent historian called “the war’s ultimate vanity project”—along with entirely fabricated capabilities such as claiming that the *Luftwaffe* could continue to supply the encircled German *6th Army* at Stalingrad by air alone, along with the failed and unrealistic German efforts to defeat the British in the Battle of Britain.¹¹² Although these examples seem both extreme and unique to a specific personality, the overall dynamic is not. It was common in all the militaries of World War II; the specific manifestation varied but the basics of self-interest, status-seeking, and reputation management existed in all the belligerents’ bureaucracies.

The Imperial Japanese military provides an even more glaring example of self-interested status-seeking behavior. Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura, ambassador to the United States in 1941, later called the “independence of the military from civilian control the ‘principal cancer of Japan’.”¹¹³ This created a significant problem for Japan, as the leadership of the different militaries made strategy (that created policy) based on their own perceived interests

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Rick Meyerowitz, “Hermann Göring,” *Military History* 29, no. 4 (2012): 80. For additional descriptions of Göring’s vanity and uniforms, see Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 444. For postwar discussion of Göring’s numerous oddities, see Jack El-Hai, *The Nazi and the Psychiatrist: Hermann Göring, Dr. Douglas M. Kelley, and a Fatal Meeting of Minds at the End of WWII* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

¹¹¹ Charles A. Pryor, “From First to ‘Wurst’,” *Air Force Journal of Logistics* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 34–45.

¹¹² There is almost no way to justify the creation of these units as anything other than self-interested status-seeking behavior from one of the top military leaders of the Third Reich. For more on the Hermann Göring *Panzer Division*, see Dennis Showalter, *Hitler’s Panzers: The Lightning Attacks that Revolutionized Warfare* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2009), 321; for more on Stalingrad, see Frank Ellis, *The Stalingrad Cauldron: Inside the Encirclement and Destruction of the 6th Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 20–21; for more on the Battle of Britain, see Victor Davis Hanson, *The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 91.

¹¹³ Quoted in James, D. Clayton, “American and Japanese Strategies in the Pacific War,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, 708.

while fighting each other and within their own ranks for status primacy. The most glaring example of this was the activity of the Imperial Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria, which “had its own vision of Japan’s future.”¹¹⁴ This force started a war in 1931 against the explicit desires and direction of military and political leadership, and “asserted its independence from civilian powers, [and] even succeeded in controlling them.”¹¹⁵ Inside the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) was “a kaleidoscope of personal cliques and pressure groups . . . all maneuvering for advancement and power. Loyalty to individuals or ideologies became more important than obedience to legitimate orders—and from time to time, the High Command lost control of whole sections of the Army.”¹¹⁶ Although an admittedly extraordinary example, this is precisely the organizational environment this book argues exists in most militaries. Although the IJA took it to a logical extreme, it is nonetheless not particularly surprising. This type of tribal interest management was not isolated to the army. In the words of historian Craig L. Symonds, “Unlike Hitler’s regime in Germany, where ultimate authority and control resided in the person of the Führer, Japan’s dictatorship was a military oligarchy where national policy decisions emerged from a complex and often contentious negotiation between the army and navy general staffs.”¹¹⁷

Within this broader environment of military self-interest and associated status competition, the Japanese leadership demonstrates an interesting and unique example of “information winnowing” discussed as a part of the principal-agent problem in chapter 5. Even long after the Battle of Midway served to initiate the inexorable series of defeats that would eventually lead to the end of the war, the Japanese military leadership was unable or unwilling to honestly assess the status of the war effort among and between leaders or to their nominal civilian masters. As D. Clayton James describes, “Tokyo reported steady progress toward the final defeat of Japan’s enemies, and field headquarters increasingly amended their after-action reports to present optimistic

¹¹⁴ Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 2001), 148–57.

¹¹⁵ Meirion Harries and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army* (New York: Random House, 1994), 167.

¹¹⁶ Harries and Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun*, 169.

¹¹⁷ Craig L. Symonds, *World War II at Sea: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 165.

results to superior echelons.”¹¹⁸ He further explains, this was so common and impenetrable that it had strategic and logistical effects; the Japanese leadership and people were literally unable to separate reality from “face saving” reporting. Worse still, the IJA was late to recognize that the Americans were beginning an offensive through the Solomon Islands because the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) did not admit their losses from the Battle of Midway. After this failure, the IJA effectively doubled down on infighting against the IJN, refusing to commit reinforcements to the Pacific and “effectively abandoning the Philippines even as the Navy was banking on a major showdown there.”¹¹⁹ Although some of these interactions might be attributed to cultural factors (e.g., the role of *face* in Japanese culture is well-known), we can see many similar dynamics within Allied leadership.¹²⁰

The United States military in World War II was just as susceptible to status competition and reputation management as its competitors and allies. As discussed above, many, perhaps most, of the decisions the U.S. senior leadership developed with the British as part of the Combined Chiefs of Staff process were self-interested and status driven. This is equally true of the decisions made by the leadership of the different Services within the U.S. military during the war. The environment in which the U.S. strategic leadership made its decisions was one that incentivized status competition; for example, Service leaders such as Navy admiral Ernest J. King, who “always focused on perception,” were unapologetic about managing their own reputation with

¹¹⁸ D. Clayton James, “American and Japanese Strategies in the Pacific War,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, 719.

¹¹⁹ Michael Barnhart, “Domestic Politics, Interservice Impasse, and Japan’s Decisions for War,” in *History and Neorealism*, ed. Ernest R. May, Richard Rosecrance, and Zara Steiner (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511778551.009>.

¹²⁰ Chun-Chi Lin and Susumu Yamaguchi, “Under What Conditions Do People Feel Face-Loss?: Effects of the Presence of Others and Social Roles on the Perception of Losing Face in Japanese Culture,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2011): 120–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022110383423>; and Akio Yabuuchi, “Face in Chinese, Japanese, and U.S. American Cultures,” *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 14, no. 2 (September 2004): 261–97, <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.14.2.05yab>.

the public and the military.¹²¹ A more deliberate and perhaps a higher-stakes example of this sort of reputation management is apparent in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, where the secretary of the Navy immediately flew to Hawaii to “show the flag” and prepare to advocate for the relief of Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and Lieutenant General Walter C. Short; not so much because of their errors leading up to the bombing, but because of their loss of status and reputation. He was concerned that their failure at Pearl Harbor, regardless of whether the facts might exonerate them, would potentially lead to a perception within the public and among military and civilian leadership that troops and leaders could not be confident in their future performance.¹²² In an interesting semi-inversion of the discussion in this book, Kimmel and his descendants would continue to fight to rehabilitate his reputation for decades, with only limited success.¹²³ As described in chapter 4, it is easy to lose reputation, but it is much harder to recover it.

Several of the most well-known American leaders in World War II appear to be difficult examples for the public choice approach. George C. Marshall, for example, was legendary for his self-sacrificing nature, willingness to put country before self, and rigid discipline. Marshall was all those things and, by all accounts, truly did focus as much as possible on the efforts to defeat the Axis powers. Nonetheless, he shows some indications of status-seeking and reputation management. In a manifestation of the axiom “where you stand depends on where you sit,” Marshall’s battles over status were rarely focused on inter-Service rivalries or personal advancement—perhaps because there was no further for him to go—but instead he constantly fought the British

¹²¹ This vignette directly discusses King’s change of the acronym for the U.S. Navy commander in chief. Prior to his assumption of the role, the acronym was CINCUS. King determined that this was unacceptable, as some might pronounce it “sink us.” He changed the acronym to COMINCH. Obviously unimportant in the long run, this is nonetheless an example of a commander who made a decision almost entirely based on how others would perceive him and his Service. A more modern version of this same dynamic occurred in 2002 when Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld changed the title of U.S. regional commanders from commander in chief (CINC) to combatant commander (CCDR). Walter R. Borneman, *The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King—The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea* (New York: Little, Brown, 2013), 214. For more about the CINC name change, see Vernon Loeb, “One ‘Chief’ Commands; Others Are Out of CINC; President Alone Has Title, Rumsfeld Says,” *Washington Post*, 29 October 2002.

¹²² Borneman, *The Admirals*, 211–12.

¹²³ For a book-length treatment of this effort, see Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan, *A Matter of Honor: Pearl Harbor: Betrayal, Blame, and a Family’s Quest for Justice* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

Imperial General Staff, Winston Churchill, and even Franklin Roosevelt.¹²⁴ In this context, he is yet another illustration of the principal-agent problem: the military decisions did not simply flow from the commander in chief through their representatives to the bottom of the chain, but instead there were ongoing, ever difficult and contentious negotiations within the chain of command and between allies. There was no deliberate decision made at the top on the optimal strategy for winning the war, but instead there was a contentious, bottom-up argument that eventually manifested in compromise, trade-offs, and actions driven from them.

Even in Marshall, we can see some manifestations of a preoccupation with status and reputation. He was extremely cognizant of his personal reputation and image. For example, he was careful to cultivate a personal appearance that kept him somewhat distant from the gregarious and informal President Roosevelt.¹²⁵ Further, his prewar papers show that he often considered prestige as a critically important factor; he often referred to prestige, reputation, esteem, or related terms when discussing decisions he made within the Army, particularly when managing personnel.¹²⁶ Finally, it is reasonable to think that Marshall also used something of a virtue strategy for accruing status. He was well aware that he had influence with, and was esteemed by, the public, politicians, and the military alike. However, he conspicuously eschewed obvious power-seeking activity, and in so doing was able to accrue even more status.¹²⁷ This is not to argue that in Marshall's case this was necessarily a deliberate strategy, but it supported his accrual of prestige and status nonetheless.

Chester W. Nimitz is the second difficult example for the framing of this book. By all accounts, he too was thoughtful, deliberate, and sought only to do what he thought was right in support of the war effort. However, as discussed in chapter 4, due to the vagaries of human psychology that include a constant underlying drive for status and reputation, Nimitz manifests some

¹²⁴ This axiom is referred to as Miles' Law for Rufus Miles, who first used it in modern times during his tenure at the head of the U.S. Bureau of the Budget in the 1940s. Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*.

¹²⁵ Ed Cray, *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: Cooper Square Press, an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 144.

¹²⁶ George C. Marshall (George Catlett), Larry I. Bland, and Sharon Ritenour Stevens, *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, vol. 3, "The Right Man for the Job," December 7, 1941–May 31, 1943 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

¹²⁷ Cray, *General of the Army*, 8–11.

of the same tendencies seen more blatantly in other examples. Postwar, Nimitz was extremely protective of his reputation; unlike many who wrote about their postwar experiences, he instead “deplored the ‘rushing into print’ of many World War II officers, particularly when their revelations tended to dim the prestige of other officers.”¹²⁸ Interestingly, in this example, Nimitz sought to protect his reputation by *not* telling his story. This is somewhat unusual in the instances discussed here, but the ultimate goal was nonetheless the same.

More importantly, just as with the other strategic efforts discussed to this point (and will continue to see), Nimitz often fought for his “piece of the pie.” As Albert Coady Wedemeyer, a senior member of the War Planning Board recalled, “We [the Army] had continuing jousts with the Navy over the Pacific. When [Douglas] MacArthur and Nimitz were fighting for Pacific priority as a whole, they presented a united front. But they had their own quarrel over the claims of the southwest and central Pacific strategies.”¹²⁹ Recall that in the framing of this book, we assume inter-Service fighting to be inherently counterproductive and a manifestation of principal-agent dynamics: as mentioned earlier in the chapter, all inter-Service conflict represents self-interested behavior to some degree. Wedemeyer’s example shows two levels of this behavior: Nimitz and MacArthur stridently advocated for resourcing to the Pacific, despite the stated priorities of the U.S. war effort (often referred to as “Europe First”). When not advocating for resourcing, however, the two Service leaders consistently fought each other for Service—and thus personal—primacy in the Pacific theater.

Unlike the previous two examples, General Douglas MacArthur provides perhaps the most well-known example of self-interested, status-maximizing, reputation-managing behavior in U.S. military history. There is almost no need to delve into the specifics, for even the most casual reader of military history knows of his egocentric and self-interested nature. The index of William Manchester’s biography of MacArthur, *American Caesar*, lists 24 separate entries for “egotism, arrogance, and megalomania,” 36 for “dramatic sense, showmanship, and self-advertising,” and 17 for “vanity, conceit, and image.”¹³⁰ It is not hyperbole to suggest that the ultimate shape of the Pacific War strategy was as much a result of self-interested leaders such as MacArthur

¹²⁸ Elmer Belmont Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), xi.

¹²⁹ Gen Albert C. Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer Reports!* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), 240.

¹³⁰ William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur, 1880–1964* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1978), 779.

as it was thoughtful, deliberate decision making. Historians have often debated the overall necessity of many different island campaigns. Did MacArthur advocate for a return to the Philippines for military necessity or vanity, egoism, and status-seeking? There is interpretive room for both stories.

Phrased more directly, a confabulatory story tells of how the United States deliberately planned a two-pronged campaign across the Pacific during World War II, thoughtfully and carefully allocating resources, managing headquarters, and synchronizing the advance so best to disrupt the Japanese forces. However, this story would be just that—historical confabulation. The end product of the World War II strategy in the Pacific was the result of circumstance combined with argument and negotiation between the U.S. Army and the Navy. These two Services jostled for status, preeminence, and the overall lead from the inception of the war. This resulted in MacArthur's drive across the Southern Pacific and Nimitz's island hopping in the Central Pacific; not because that was the rationally optimal strategy, but because that was the solution that emerged from constant negotiation, renegotiation, and satisficing for acceptable courses of action instead of selecting one preferred option and executing down the hierarchy. This is not to suggest that it would have been possible to select a single optimal strategy, only illustrating that in this case one was clearly *not* chosen.¹³¹ Indeed, in his own words, MacArthur “disagree[d] with some of [King's] strategic concepts,” and argued that liberating the Philippines was a moral imperative and not doing so would catastrophically damage American prestige in the “Oriental mind.”¹³² Eisenhower again provides useful commentary, writing that “MacArthur is as big a baby as ever.” He fought to get his way, and when he did not, he was known to devolve into what Eisenhower referred to as “dramatics.”¹³³

Even during MacArthur's darkest days, the Japanese siege of Bataan and Corregidor from December 1941 to March 1942, the general showed his laser focus on his own personal status. He tightly censored information about the battle, and he made sure that only one person got credit when credit seemed due: MacArthur. His biographer, D. Clayton James, claimed that “of 142 such communiqués [from MacArthur's headquarters] issued between December 8, 1941 and March 11, 1942, 109 mentioned only one individual,

¹³¹ Potter, *Nimitz*, 212.

¹³² MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, 198.

¹³³ Eisenhower and Butcher, “Personal and Official Diary of Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower.”

MacArthur.” His headquarters routinely released messages that seemed like “blatant self-advertising,” and frequently described battles and events that never happened, constantly referring to “MacArthur’s Army.”¹³⁴ As we will see, this behavior would continue well into the next war.

Finally, the discussion approaches the European theater. Dwight Eisenhower is the obvious example of senior leadership here, although there are others that could be considered. Like Marshall and Nimitz, Eisenhower represents a difficult case for the framing here, as he was a generally honest and self-sacrificing leader. Nonetheless, he also demonstrated the status and reputation management dynamics that many World War II leaders showed. In his memoir, Eisenhower describes carefully how his actions might affect his reputation immediately before the war began, writing that he wanted to ensure he did not become known as an “eager beaver.”¹³⁵ It is reasonable to assume this way of thinking continued during and after the war as well. Eisenhower appears to have been particularly attuned to this way of thought; in his wartime diary, he recalled that most people offering advice were in fact seeking to burnish their own status. In a letter he wrote in 1942, he described having to relieve senior leaders during the Operation Torch invasion of North Africa because “they got to worrying about ‘injustice,’ ‘unfairness,’ [and] ‘prestige’.”¹³⁶ After Operation Torch was complete, in an interesting manifestation of advocacy for one’s own mandate at the expense of the greater strategy, Eisenhower, in command of the Mediterranean theater, advocated for continued operations in Sicily and Italy, which was *directly contrary to the explicit American strategy that he had helped produce*.¹³⁷ Where you stand depends on where you sit, indeed.

There are ample other examples of individual or organizational self-interest throughout the course of the war, despite, or perhaps even because of its existential stakes. Against all reason, in an extremely distasteful episode of reputation management, the U.S. Navy’s Bureau of Ordnance (BuOrd)

¹³⁴ D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur, 1941–1945* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 90.

¹³⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 238. The specific goal of this particular reputation management, trying to make sure he did not become known as someone who jumps at opportunities, is less germane than the general sentiment. He explicitly shows that he considered his Service reputation in his calculations about his personal service.

¹³⁶ Eisenhower and Butcher, “Personal and Official Diary of Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower”; and Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 254.

¹³⁷ Eisenhower, quoted in Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer Reports!*, 215.

fought its own people. For nearly two years of war, American submariners reported regular failures of the Mark XIV torpedo. Instead of admitting possible error, and thus potentially sullying the reputation of the bureau, the Navy blamed “rookie” submarine captains.¹³⁸ The Navy’s official history of the Bureau of Ordnance in World War II concedes the point, blandly describing the problem as the “Bureau’s reluctance to accept the fleet evaluation of its weapons.” The official history claims that “this reluctance was born not of any petty attempts to cover past errors, but from misplaced confidence in its own past work.”¹³⁹ Although the reasons for this failure are many, it seems likely that this event was indeed “born of petty attempts to cover past errors,” as the relevant research in chapters 3 and 4 supports. It appears glaringly clear that the organizational effort for reputation management in this case took precedence over the lives of individual submariners as well as the national effort to win an existential war. Only when the evidence was too great to ignore, and the collective status of admirals arrayed against them became overwhelming, did the bureau back down. More often, the submariners who would actually suffer from bureaucratic reputation protection just handled the problem on their own: as Clay Blair, historian of the World War II submarine campaign, described, defects were “discovered and fixed in the field—always over the stubborn opposition of the Bureau of Ordnance.”¹⁴⁰

The airpower advocates of World War II (and many since) showed similar organizational stubbornness. Indeed, for the Army Air Corps, the organizational stakes may have seemed even greater than for the Bureau of Ordnance, since it was fighting for its independence from the U.S. Army and seeking to prove that it was a manifestly strategic and war-winning asset. As many critical studies have shown, the effects of strategic bombing campaigns in the European and Pacific theaters were at best debatable and at worst wasted efforts. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the analysts who developed the postwar *Strategic Bombing Survey*, reflected that the overall strategic bombing effort was “one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest, miscalculation of the war.”¹⁴¹ Whether the effort was successful, it is clear that it was not solely or even mostly focused on winning the war in accordance with

¹³⁸ Borneman, *The Admirals*, 370–71.

¹³⁹ William B. Boyd and Buford Rowland, *U.S. Navy Bureau of Ordnance in World War II* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Ordnance, Department of the Navy, 1953), 90.

¹⁴⁰ Clay Blair Jr., *Silent Victory: The U.S. Submarine War against Japan* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 438–39.

¹⁴¹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs* (London: Deutsch, 1981), 206.

the declared national strategies of the United States and Allied nations. As Robert Pape describes, by the end of World War II, “each service and President [Harry S.] Truman’s civilian advisers came to advocate a strategy to end the war which would dovetail with their interest in obtaining public credit for Japan’s surrender.”¹⁴² Robert Farley is more direct, writing that “there is no question that the [U.S. Army Air Forces] USAAF dedication to strategic bombing stemmed from a commitment to organizational independence.” He continues, “the USAAF saw the war as an opportunity to demonstrate the technical and doctrinal viability of its military model, a priority that sometimes *conflicted with strategic necessity*.”¹⁴³ Without wading more deeply into the ever contentious (and still ongoing) debate about the efficacy of airpower in World War II, it is nonetheless reasonable to suggest that the leaders of the Army Air Corps had many incentives to see the results that they wanted to see to support the overall status of their Service, and thus themselves.

Given the existential nature of the fight, World War II represents perhaps the hardest set of examples for this book. There are nonetheless plentiful instances of self-interested, status, and reputation-seeking behavior. Indeed, this section has only scratched the surface, and the pages that follow offer examples of this activity when the discussion returns to World War II in the next chapter. Most importantly, these examples have begun to show the flaws in the confabulatory models of military decision making described in part 1. Strategic decisions, even in this the most existential of wars, were not made rationally by individuals at the top of the hierarchy who carefully considered each option, weighed costs and benefits, and then implemented them down the chain of command. Instead, individual and organizational advocacy and argument at every level and in every theater

¹⁴² Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 91. The debate over the efficacy of strategic airpower in World War II and today remains hotly contested. This debate is a manifestation of status competition between the Air Force and the other Services. Indeed, the Air Force would greatly prefer to claim exactly what it claimed before World War II: that it alone could provide a war-winning capability that was far less costly than what the other Services could offer. Most observers do not consider this to be entirely accurate; some are far more critical. For another discussion of strategic bombing, see Jurgen Brauer and Hubert van Tuyl, *Castles, Battles, and Bombs: How Economics Explains Military History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁴³ Robert M. Farley, *Grounded: The Case for Abolishing the United States Air Force* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 96. Emphasis added. Farley is clearly biased in one direction on this matter; nonetheless, he has conducted extensive research into the history of the Air Force and his perspective aligns with the other, less biased, references above.

created and shaped the strategy. The dynamic this book describes—self-interested status and reputation maximization—permeates the histories of existential conflict. Is it possible that these conflicts somehow make this activity *more* likely? Perhaps it is possible that the hard examples somehow select for status-seeking and self-interest, and the easy ones do not? In the following section, we will see examples of “wars of choice” that demonstrate how this is almost certainly not the case.

The “Easier” Examples

The two World Wars should represent the hardest cases for showing organizational and individual self-interest. As existential conflicts, if nothing else, one must assume that collective interests—national survival—align well with personal interests (individual survival or freedom). Yet, as we have seen in the preceding pages, it was perfectly normal during these wars to see organizations and individuals privilege their own interests to the likely detriment of the war effort. The fact that many of these entities likely believed that their self-interested behavior was the best thing for the collective war effort does not disprove the theory, instead it strengthens it. As Bernard Brodie wrote of psychological influences in *War and Politics*, “We can guess at one good reason for it [selective inattention]—the influence of the unconscious parts of our psyches upon our motivation. That which we want deeply to do, we usually find good reason for doing—and miss seeing good reasons for refraining from doing it.”¹⁴⁴ From the perspective of a modern researcher, “all reasoning is in some way motivated.”¹⁴⁵ When an actor wants to do something, it is easy and common for them to justify it—to themselves and others—with any or all tools available. It is worth asking, however, if this dynamic is somehow less common when the stakes are lower. Are there examples of strategic-level individual and organizational behavior in peacetime or during smaller conflicts that also align to the public choice interpretation of military decision making?

There most assuredly are. Immediately following World War II, the United States had an atomic monopoly and the Soviet threat had not yet risen to the level of “scar[ing] the hell out of the American people,” to paraphrase

¹⁴⁴ Brodie, *War and Politics*, 306.

¹⁴⁵ James Southworth, “A Perspective-Taking Theory of Open-Mindedness: Confronting the Challenge of Motivated Reasoning,” *Educational Theory* 71, no. 5 (2021): 589–607, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12497>.

Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg (R-MI).¹⁴⁶ Nonetheless, these years saw some of the nastiest bureaucratic fighting between the U.S. military Services before or since. Broadly described, this battle was over unification: whether the different Services should be integrated into a single, unified, department of defense. The battle lines generally placed the Navy on one side and the Army, Army Air Force, and administration on the other; and as one would expect, the members of the different Services fought vigorously for what they perceived to be in their best interest. Indeed, the report of the secretary of defense from fiscal year 1948 explicitly states, “It is not strange that professional military men should think in the terms of the service to which they have devoted their entire adult lives; it is to be expected.”¹⁴⁷ It was obvious to contemporary observers that this was a fight for relative status between the Services and those who represented them.

Interestingly, much of the literature about this fight does not attempt to couch it in terms of the best outcome for the nation; instead, it is almost entirely framed as infighting over status, influence, and the power associated with these dynamics. Historian Gordon W. Keiser described the “lobbying” efforts of the Services in this fight, writing how “the extent to which each service went in attempting to influence key participants and the public was unrivalled to that time.”¹⁴⁸ Again, the sheer act of lobbying on the part of the Services would be unsurprising to public choice theorists who expect this type of rent-seeking behavior on the part of organizations. This activity proves the point, as the Services sought to protect themselves at the expense of some agreed on “best option.” Although they all surely told themselves they were supporting the nation’s interest, their rationalizations are immaterial. Amy Zegart describes the inter-Service conflicts in more depth, explaining how the Navy’s preferred approach “did more than just pit service interests against national interests. It gave service interests the upper hand, impeding development of ‘an over-all Joint viewpoint’.” She explains that, because of the status the Navy held with the public and important political interests,

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 49–50.

¹⁴⁷ *Report of the Secretary of Defense, Fiscal Year 1948* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1948).

¹⁴⁸ Gordon W. Keiser, *The U.S. Marine Corps and Defense Unification 1944–47: The Politics of Survival* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1982), 123.

President Truman had to satisfy those demands: it was “simply too important to ignore.”¹⁴⁹ This fight culminated in what became known as the “Revolt of the Admirals” after Chief of Naval Operations Louis E. Denfeld publicly disagreed in congressional testimony in late 1949.¹⁵⁰ Although ostensibly about strategy and the acquisition of new weapons systems, in reality it was about Service primacy, and it is one of the few occasions where senior civilian and military leaders of the military Services attacked each other in public and in front of Congress.¹⁵¹

As we might expect, organizational and individual self-interest drove many wartime decisions after World War II as well. The Korean War provided ample opportunity for this, and the actions of General Douglas MacArthur represent the apotheosis of self-interested decision making. The normal MacArthur antics are of course included in this episode: the promotion of lackeys whose primary qualification was their loyalty and recognition of his status, the vanity and self-referential decision making, deliberate posturing for future gain (he appeared to be preparing for a presidential run), and many more. The most glaring example ultimately led to his relief. Army general Matthew B. Ridgway, an astute observer and successor to MacArthur as Supreme Commander of United Nations Forces described how MacArthur’s “vision of himself as the swordsman who would slay the communist dragon” likely influenced him and “add[ed] luster to his dream of victory.”¹⁵² Not only did he try to expand the Korean War beyond the boundaries and limitations that were set by the U.S. government, but he flagrantly ignored the higher policy that was intended to govern the conduct of the war by deliberately sabotaging a peace initiative that could have ended the war.¹⁵³ This “sabotage,” as Secretary of State Dean Acheson called it, culminated in MacArthur personally issuing what amounted to an ultimatum to the Chinese. This statement created a policy decision in complete opposition of the

¹⁴⁹ Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 129.

¹⁵⁰ “Text of Denfeld Summation,” *New York Times*, 14 October 1949.

¹⁵¹ Jeffrey G. Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945–1950* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1994).

¹⁵² Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 38.

¹⁵³ For a contemporary account, see Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 141–56; For a more modern interpretation, see: Weintraub, *MacArthur’s War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero*, 324–32. This is an admittedly biased account; however, it is well documented and supported by evidence. For a more balanced treatment, see Manchester, *American Caesar*.

one President Truman intended to pursue and ultimately led to MacArthur's relief from command.¹⁵⁴

As already discussed, MacArthur was unusually status and reputation driven (or at least unusually open about it). Perhaps, then, might we assume that he acted outside of the norm during the Korean War? No. Even one of the most legendary and respected leaders during the war, his successor Matthew Ridgway, showed evidence of status and reputation management as a top priority. Affectionately known as "Old Iron Tits" for the hand grenade he kept strapped to his chest at all times, history suggests that this was a clear example of managing one's image, as many generals have been known to do (e.g., General George S. Patton's pearl-handled revolvers, MacArthur's evolving costumes, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's beret, or even General James N. Mattis' personal armored reconnaissance vehicle during the Iraq War). Although Ridgway denied deliberately cultivating this image in his memoir, it is difficult to believe that the senior general in all of Korea truly thought he would be in position to use a hand grenade, one of the most short-range weapons in the U.S. inventory.¹⁵⁵

Beyond this fairly normal and somewhat minor cultivation of image, however, there are examples of Ridgway making strategic-level decisions based on status dynamics. Herbert Goldhamer, a Rand analyst, wrote a top-secret report on his observations of the 1951 Armistice Conference in Korea. Now declassified, Goldhamer describes Ridgway's "stubbornness" and unwillingness to back down in negotiations with Communist forces. Far from unusual in a context such as this, Goldhamer also describes how Ridgway's stubbornness was not rational, and instead appeared to be "motivated by matters of personal self-esteem involved in the situation." He further describes how UN policy during September 1951 was "conditioned by the sense of personal outrage and involvement of honor occasioned by the incident." According to Goldhamer, although policy considerations came to the fore during negotiations, it would be difficult to determine how much they were rationalizations of other motives; in this case, defense of personal and national status and reputation.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 634–37; For the final decision to relieve MacArthur of command, see Truman, "Memorandum, 'The MacArthur Dismissal'."

¹⁵⁵ Matthew B. Ridgway with Harold H. Martin, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York, Harper, 1956), 219.

¹⁵⁶ Herbert Goldhamer, Andrew W. Marshall, and Ernest R. May, *The 1951 Korean Armistice Conference: A Personal Memoir* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1994), 108–9.

The next major U.S. conflict, Vietnam, also bore all the hallmarks of status-seeking behavior in the making and execution of strategic-level decisions. Although it was in many ways a major conflict, it was also a war of choice. Even during its most consuming years, the effort in Vietnam did not mobilize or focus the U.S. military the way World War I or II did. The stakes were never of the same existential nature found in those earlier wars, and even analysts who believed the fall of South Vietnam would lead to the “fall” of the rest of Southeast Asia to international Communism (Domino Theory) did not believe the Vietnam War represented an existential conflict. Given the much lower stakes, we should expect to find many examples of individual and institutional self-interest manifest in the conflict. This is indeed the case. According to Edward Luttwak, “Patriotic dedication, bureaucratic urge, and even narrow personal interest were easily combined in the advocacy of all the different strategies.”¹⁵⁷ Former national security advisor H. R. McMaster described how “loyalty to their [the Joint Chiefs of Staff] services also weighed against opposing the president and the secretary of defense,” and later describes specific concessions the administration gave to each chief that made them willing to tolerate and even support the Lyndon B. Johnson administration’s actions in Vietnam, even though they knew the administration was deceiving Congress and they did not believe the approach to be a winning strategy.¹⁵⁸ McMaster alleges that the military members who were responsible for the highest levels of military strategy during the Vietnam War were willing to make a quid pro quo trade: disregard the collective good of the nation for the good of their respective Services. Public choice theory would predict and agree with this perspective.

The most senior leader in Vietnam for much of the war, Army general William C. Westmoreland, was deliberate at managing his status and reputation. We will discuss him more in the next chapter, but his reporting to national leadership provides an excellent example of deliberate manipulation and obfuscation of information to protect his own status and that of his organization. Contemporary CIA analyst Samuel A. Adams wrote a book-length treatment of this phenomenon in which he documents administrative fights between the intelligence community and U.S. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (the senior headquarters in Vietnam) over the enemy “order of

¹⁵⁷ Edward Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War* (New York: Touchstone, 1986), 31.

¹⁵⁸ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 330–31.

battle.” Although for many this might seem to be arcane minutiae, it was critically important at the time. Adams’ analysis showed that the war was unwinnable in the late 1960s; in his telling, Westmoreland and his headquarters quashed release of his interpretation of enemy numbers to protect their narrative that the war was winnable and that the U.S. forces were succeeding.¹⁵⁹ This episode eventually led to a CBS television documentary titled *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*. In an extreme example of efforts by senior leaders to protect their personal reputation, Westmoreland sued CBS for libel and defamation, seeking \$120 million in damages. The suit settled out of court, but it is clear that Westmoreland was willing to go to extraordinary effort to protect his personal reputation.¹⁶⁰

Beyond the information manipulation of William Westmoreland and his staff (as expected based on the framing of this volume), the Vietnam War resembled World War I in the U.S. military’s strategic focus on higher status *ideas*. Indeed, the strategy for the war was shaped and developed by the ideas the U.S. military held dear. As Lieutenant General Phillip Davidson wrote, “The debate about the proper strategy was further confused by the ideological biases, the personal experiences, and the self-interests of the various proponents [of the war].” He further explains how the U.S. military had a “fundamental dislike and distrust” of any strategy that relinquished the initiative and did not show a bias for offensive action.¹⁶¹ Ultimately, this focus on offensive action paired with a mirror-image assumption that so-called enemy “main force” units must be the most important thing on the battlefield, and the so-called “enclave” strategy or pursuing counterinsurgency as anything other than ancillary were deprioritized in the minds of U.S. military leaders. Andrew F. Krepinevich writes that “in Vietnam the Army ended up trying to fight the kind of conventional war that it was trained, organized and prepared (and that it *wanted*) to fight instead of the counterinsurgency war that it was

¹⁵⁹ Sam Adams, *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir of the Vietnam War’s Uncounted Enemy* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth, 1998). Although much of this story remains debated, in a tacit acknowledgment of Adams’s efforts, it is notable that the CIA has since created an award for integrity named after him: The Sam Adams Award for Integrity in Intelligence.

¹⁶⁰ For the summary judgment in this case, see United States District Court, Southern District of New York, *Westmoreland v. CBS Inc.*, 596 F. Supp. 1170; and for a book-length treatment of the case, see Renata Adler, *Reckless Disregard* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

¹⁶¹ Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 346–47, 355.

sent to fight.”¹⁶² The status of a conventional enemy and offensive action took priority in the minds of U.S. military leaders and thus shaped the focus of the entire U.S. strategy.¹⁶³ This would ultimately manifest into one of the most grotesque versions of status-seeking behavior—a competition for body counts. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

The U.S. military’s more modern wars also provide plentiful examples of status and reputation maximization at the strategic level.¹⁶⁴ During the planning for Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) leadership was frustrated by the fact that “most of the chiefs [Joint Chiefs] wanted to make parochial contributions that would only benefit their own services’ equities.”¹⁶⁵ For his part, General Tommy Franks, CENTCOM commander reciprocated, showing all the hallmarks of competing for status with the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs at the time, Army general Henry Hugh Shelton, “observed that ‘as soon as Tommy [Franks] was promoted to four-star, he developed a hell of an ego’.”¹⁶⁶ Status competition emerged later in these wars as well. The most telling example, perhaps, is the way the U.S. Marine Corps “insisted on having their own area of operations in Southwest Afghanistan; their unwillingness to share control with the Army diluted the impact of the troop surge and injected more internal disunity into an already complex conflict.”¹⁶⁷ Rajiv Chandrasekaran writes that “there was another reason the Marines wound up in Helmand: They wanted it.” He describes how the organizational politics that come along with the status-focused Marine Corps led the Service to aggressively advocate for its own area of operations with a unique chain of command.¹⁶⁸ This is clearly *not* an example of

¹⁶² Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 271, <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801828638>.

¹⁶³ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 350–62; and Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 60–100.

¹⁶⁴ Many might have argued that the change from draft-based military to the all-volunteer force after the Vietnam War should have changed this dynamic. This is entirely possible; although, as we will discuss in subsequent chapters, it may not have changed for the better.

¹⁶⁵ LtGen Michael P. DeLong, USMC, quoted in Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military after Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 84.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 407.

¹⁶⁷ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 133.

¹⁶⁸ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 64–67.

rationally decided strategy in search of the best possible military and political outcome.

An interesting and somewhat unique manifestation of reputation management at the highest levels in the United States' modern conflicts takes a different form: relief of general officers. During the two most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, neither one a clear victory by any measure, no strategic-level leaders have been publicly relieved of duty for poor performance. In a way, this harkens back to World War I, where "politicians were captives of the vast prestige surrounding their own appointed generals."¹⁶⁹ In the modern era, few generals have had cults of personality like Joffre or MacArthur, although some have tried to build their mystique in similar ways.¹⁷⁰ It is more likely that the lack of reliefs during modern warfare is a mix of two dynamics. The first is likely due to the respect the American public holds for the military. Although trust has fallen to some degree in recent years, the military remains one of the only institutions in public life that is trusted a "great deal" by the majority of Americans.¹⁷¹ This dynamic is likely to make elected civilian leaders extremely cautious about removing military commanders. Second, it pairs with deliberate reputation management on the part of the Services: one of the primary reasons there have been few reliefs for poor performance at the general officer level during the past 20 years of war is the way the Services believe these acts would reflect on themselves. Tom Ricks writes that, "while in World War II, the firing of a general was seen as a sign that the system was working as planned, now, in the rare instances when it does occur, it tends to be seen, especially inside the Army, as a sign that the system has somehow failed."¹⁷²

Because the Services actively manage their reputations, they are exceptionally loathe to support the relief of commanders who bear the imprimatur of Service legitimacy and reputation due to their rank. Indeed, some have suggested that this is a deliberate managerial technique designed explicitly to diffuse blame when something goes wrong, thus protecting organizational and individual reputations. Retired Air Force general Paula G. Thornhill calls

¹⁶⁹ Brodie, *War and Politics*, 14.

¹⁷⁰ The best-known example of this is Gen David H. Petraeus, sometimes called "King David." For a discussion of his self-promotion and status seeking, see Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 170.

¹⁷¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low," Gallup News, 5 July 2022.

¹⁷² Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 11.

it “accountability soup.”¹⁷³ In an earlier era, Navy admiral Hyman G. Rickover bemoaned a similar problem, calling the practice of constant, rapid rotation of officers without clear accountability at the top “a system for evasion of responsibility.”¹⁷⁴ Proof for this might be in the general officer reliefs that *have* occurred during much of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), almost all due to personal failings that reflect directly on the individual and less on the Service, as Edward Luttwak describes in the epigraph to this chapter.¹⁷⁵ It is telling that in the recent so-called “Fat Leonard” scandal, a case where numerous senior leaders were at least implicated, the U.S. Navy seems content to proceed with business as usual. Indeed, in this case, where many Navy leaders seemingly accepted bribes and other gifts in return for manipulating schedules and providing classified information (among other things), the Navy has avoided significant public punishment for any flag officer involved. This, despite such obvious failings as having the perpetrator of the scandal—Leonard G. Francis, a.k.a. Fat Leonard—attend the Chief of Naval Operations’ change of command gala as his personal guest.¹⁷⁶ In bygone years, even the appearance of impropriety might have led to the removal of leaders; in the modern era, the Services appear to see public reprimand and removal as a threat to organizational reputation and thus prefer to avoid it when possible, and keep it out of the public eye when they cannot.¹⁷⁷

There are many more examples of how these dynamics manifest at the strategic level in other ways than addressed here. They show in the propensity of militaries to build or seek “prestige weapons,” like the Japanese super battleships of World War II, the common requests from allied nations for expensive or “critical” weapons they cannot use and do not need, or the constant focus of military acquisition efforts on assets that the organization views as exciting

¹⁷³ Paula G. Thornhill quoted in Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 162.

¹⁷⁴ Maureen Mylander, *The Generals: Making It, Military-Style* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), 192. A recent book discusses this dynamic in depth, referring to it as an “accountability sink.” Dan Davies, *The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions—And How the World Lost Its Mind* (London: Profile Books, 2024), 9–36.

¹⁷⁵ Luttwak was writing on the topic in the early 1980s; this suggests that little, if any, has changed in this regard since the advent of the all-volunteer force.

¹⁷⁶ Geoff Ziezulewicz, “How Did Fat Leonard Attend This Former CNO’s Change of Command? He Was on the VIP List,” *Navy Times*, 23 July 2021. For a book-length treatment of the Fat Leonard scandal, see Craig Whitlock, *Fat Leonard: How One Man Bribed, Bilked, and Seduced the U.S. Navy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024).

¹⁷⁷ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 130.

at the expense of the necessary but less prestigious.¹⁷⁸ Examples of this might be the U.S. Navy's neglect of minesweepers, icebreakers, or underway replenishment vessels—obvious necessities but often neglected in favor of warships. This manifested in critically important ways during the Cold War, as policy analyst Edward Geist describes Service interests and status competition over the U.S. strategy for nuclear war. His research shows that this competition fed into and shaped arguments about civil defense and saving American lives in the shadow of “mutually assured destruction;” the issues were rarely about how many lives might be saved during a nuclear conflagration, but instead about organizations shaping strategy “for their own ends.”¹⁷⁹

In subsequent chapters, we will discuss how these and similar dynamics apply at the tactical level, where warfighters throughout conflicts show a historically common propensity to deliberately attack prestige targets. Examples of this might be the inexplicable focus of Japanese submarines during World War II on U.S. warships instead of supply or refueling ships, a common distaste for attacking weak or “dishonorable” enemies among warfighters, or the oft-discussed tendency for pilots to attack large, obvious, or seemingly prestigious targets even when they may have been tasked to do otherwise.¹⁸⁰ A related dynamic is visible in the consistent over reporting of success, particularly battle damage assessments by pilots, inflated body counts after ground combat, or estimated ships sunk in battle. It highlights a clear status-seeking effort; despite the fact that erroneous reporting obviously could be (and often has been) detrimental to the overall war effort, we should nonetheless expect individuals to inflate or exaggerate their success. This has consistently proven to be the case; it is not important solely because individuals were seeking status, but instead because each of these individual efforts to accrue status

¹⁷⁸ Symonds, *World War II at Sea*, 167–69. The author is familiar with this dynamic, as leaders from allied nations such as Afghanistan would often request to purchase (or be given) high-tech weapons like the M1 Abrams main battle tank. When asked how they intended to maintain or refuel the vehicles, these leaders would consistently explain that this was not important. The *prestige* of having such a weapon—working or not—was far more important.

¹⁷⁹ Edward M. Geist, *Armageddon Insurance: Civil Defense in the United States and Soviet Union, 1945–1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 162–65.

¹⁸⁰ For Japanese submarines focusing on warships, see Borneman, *The Admirals*, 372. For dishonorable targets, see Symonds, *World War II at Sea*, 560. An example of this dynamic can also be seen in Japanese *kamikaze* attacks off the coast of Okinawa, where instead of attacking aircraft carriers as they had been instructed, the pilots often focused on picket ships stationed miles away with the express intent of attracting *kamikaze* attention. See Symonds, *World War II at Sea*, 622.

had major implications for operations and strategy. Status-seeking behavior at the individual level, whether a low-level tactical soldier or a senior leader is what shapes the overall strategy and operations that we can only understand in hindsight.

Status-seeking and its counterpart reputation management is common. It manifests regularly because people are inherently self-interested, and members socialized into the military are uniquely interested in these specific dynamics. High rank and important position do not make someone less likely to prioritize status dynamics, in fact, it is more common for high-ranking members of organizations to aggressively manage their own and their organizations' reputations. In addition, those who are responsible for strategic decisions—by definition those who have made it to the highest echelons of the Service—are more likely than most to be ambitious.¹⁸¹ This manifests in the military as status-seeking behavior. It is critical to note, that this behavior is not only found at the top of the hierarchy. It exists at all levels, and we should expect *all* servicemembers to act in this fashion. In the next chapter, we will see examples of leaders and organizations making self-interested, status-seeking, reputation-managing decisions at the operational level of command.

¹⁸¹ For a discussion of this dynamic within bureaucracies see Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, 21–23.

Chapter 7

The Operational Level of Status and Reputation

Colonel Cathcart was overjoyed, for he was relieved of the embarrassing commitment to bomb Bologna without blemish to the reputation for valor he had earned by volunteering his men to do it. General Dreedle was pleased with the capture of Bologna, too, although he was angry with Colonel Moodus for waking him up to tell him about it. Headquarters was also pleased and decided to award a medal to the officer who captured the city. There was no officer who had captured the city, so they gave the medal to General Peckem instead, because General Peckem was the only officer with sufficient initiative to ask for it.

~ Joseph Heller¹

While strategy operates at the interface of policy and the military, the *operational level of war* is a purely military concept. Although some have disputed its utility or even whether it exists, for this analysis it is a useful construct. The simplest way to discuss the operational level of war is to consider it as the U.S. military's Joint doctrine does: as the realm of theater commanders and their subordinate components. These individuals seek to link strategic objectives with tactical actions using campaigns and operations—sequences of actions to achieve a specifically defined end state.² What constitutes the operational level of war is the subject of significant debate within military circles and outside the scope of this current work.

¹ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), 119.

² *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013).

For the purposes of this discussion, the operational level of war refers to military actions (and their associated commanders) that tie together discrete tactical actions with the intent of achieving strategic effects. Thus, for example, the operational level of war might include Operation Barbarossa (the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union) on the eastern front of World War II. The decision to invade was in the realm of policy and strategy, and the battles of individual formations involved tactics. The operational level of war is found where the commanders of the eastern front sought to link tactical objectives to achieve some strategic aim, or in this case, seizure of specific territory to accomplish Adolf Hitler's ultimate policy goal of creating *lebensraum* (living space) for the Third Reich (among other objectives).³ In many modern conflicts, the distinctions between the levels of war often become nebulous and difficult to parse; this work does not seek to apply rigid definitional rigor here, but will instead provide examples of where commanders who generally fit the description of operational leaders made self-interested decisions with reputation and status as a primary goal. As expected, there are many, and they almost always manifest from the principal-agent problem, where military courses of action to maximize someone's status is unlikely to be in the collective best interest of the nation or align with the stated national strategy for a given conflict. Although, as before, many leaders are likely to convince themselves otherwise.

This chapter approaches the topic in a slightly different manner than the previous. Since we have already determined that the difficult example of existential war is equally susceptible to the dynamics described by this theory as any other military situation, we will proceed with examples from successive conflicts. As before, this work is not intended to prove that self-interested decision making is the only driver for military action, but instead that it is a plausible and often accurate explanation for specific activities. This theory offers a useful corrective lens to view existing rational choice theories of military decision making; it may not explain every campaign, but if it serves to better

³ The term *lebensraum* was a policy used by Nazi Germany to expand their territory and acquire resources for the German people while driving out undesirable populations like the Jews and Slavs. The term was coined by German geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel. Influenced by Charles Darwin, he developed a concept of social Darwinism, applying the idea of survival of the fittest to nation-states. To his thinking, human migration was necessary to gain the territory and resources required for a people to thrive. Charles S. Thomas, "World War II," in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict*, 2d ed., ed. Lester Kurtz (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012373985-8.00205-1>.

answer why otherwise strange or inexplicable choices were made, then it has served its purpose. Given that the number of operational commanders is exponentially larger in any conflict than strategic leaders, this work also does not suggest that these examples represent anything resembling completeness. There will inevitably be a number of leaders not addressed, which is deliberate and reflective of an intentional argumentation-by-example approach. This method and the inherent gaps within it will necessarily lead to accusations of cherry picking; it is left to the reader to determine if these efforts have been successful.

The reader also will likely note that many of the personalities from the previous chapter make an appearance here as well. As mentioned above, it can be difficult to draw a clean line between operational command and strategic command in many cases. In the case of the World Wars, this treatment generally considers that national-level decisions like inter-Service squabbling that shapes the overall war effort rises to the strategic level, while decisions about specific battles or battlefield actions are more operational. However, by the definition above, operational actions *all* shape strategy, as they must. As such, the reader may disagree with how various operational or strategic leaders are characterized. In the case of World War I particularly, note that especially on the western front, strategy, operations, and at times even tactical decisions are compressed and could often be characterized as any—or all—three.

As before, this chapter is founded on several key assumptions. Critically, it assumes that organizational or personal conflicts are necessarily self-referential and inherently counter to the collective interest. Indeed, even if all parties to such a conflict act in good faith, it must nonetheless be true that one or all of them is causing some degradation of the collective interest. If there can be such a thing as an optimal course of action, then a conflict regarding that course of action must detract from it. Everyone cannot be right if there is a single right answer and they disagree on what it is. In the real world, of course, there is usually no such thing as one best course of action. However, it remains true that two or more actors who knowingly continue a conflict instead of working toward the collective good should be seen as selfish, at best, and deliberately acting contrary to the collective interest, at worst.⁴ Since general officers and military leaders who have risen to lead at the operational level of war are likely to have the traits that encourage sta-

⁴ This is not to claim that disagreements about courses of action should not happen; only that when they do happen, they necessarily degrade the collective mission.

tus-seeking, we should expect self-interested conflict. David Zabecki writes that “generals, as a rule, do not play well together. Any military officer who rises to the general officer ranks is almost certainly decisive, self-confident, aggressive, and competitive.”⁵

Remember, status and reputation maximization in and of themselves are not the important point. Although it is generally interesting that servicemembers are status and reputation maximizing, the more important point is that this behavior is what actually shapes military decisions. In existing models of military decision making and most historical accounts that describe it, the fundamental assumptions described in chapter 1 of a brain-body dynamic, Jim Storr’s analogy of a “golden thread of purpose,” or other, similar descriptions obtained.⁶ These examples of self-interested decision making belie this. At the strategic level in the previous chapter, it was obvious how strategic actors seeking personal status or protecting their reputation shaped the large-scale decisions made in their era or conflict. Whether more obvious actions such as Army general Matthew B. Ridgway delaying armistice negotiations in Korea, General Douglas MacArthur driving the U.S. Pacific strategy toward the Philippines, or more subtle versions such as General John J. Pershing’s focus on the “high status idea” of open tactics, strategic decisions clearly have a large effect on the course of wars.

Operational decisions are inherently less obvious. Nonetheless, we will see in the following chapter many examples of self-interested status competition that shape future action. This might manifest as conflicts between operational leaders that change the way a battle is fought, advocacy for theaters, capabilities, or battles that are irrelevant to the greater strategy, or even blatant disregard of direct orders. We will see each of these. Most importantly, these actions shape the direction of militaries in conflict and peace from the bottom up, contrary to the standard descriptions of military decision making found in chapter 1. The following chapter offers examples of how this materializes on the battlefield at the operational level of command. As before, the way these examples affected the course of a conflict or the direction of history will often be readily apparent. The effects of actions like intrigue leading to the replacement of commanders and changing who is making important de-

⁵ David T. Zabecki, *The Generals’ War: Operational Level Command on the Western Front in 1918* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 69.

⁶ Jim Storr, *Something Rotten: Land Command in the 21st Century* (Havant, Hampshire: Howgate Publishing Limited, 2022).

cisions should be clear. Others will be less obvious, such as deliberate image cultivation on the part of a particular commander or fighting about who had the higher rank. Each of these matters, as every decision made in someone's self-interest refutes the idea that military decision making is a cascade of decisions rationally made in the best interest of the nation. It is instead composed of a multitude of individuals who each make the best decisions they can, influenced by their unique personal circumstance, psychology, and the drive to maximize status and reputation.

The World Wars

World War I provides many examples of self-interested status-seeking behavior at the operational level of war. Just as with the strategic level, this most often manifests in two ways: a focus on either personal status or on status that accrues to a unit, operation, idea, or objective. Both of these are quite common, and they may manifest at the same time in the same place or separately. In the early months of World War I, battles such as the one that raged around the Belgian town of Ypres, became examples of status-focused behavior that would drag on for years. Ypres and its surrounding area lost essentially all military utility by November 1914; instead, it was “a hero city whose possession had become a matter of prestige.” Along with the town, the “Allies held the [Ypres] salient, a dubious asset that exposed its defenders to constant bombardment from German artillery on the overlooking ridges.”⁷ The Allies of the Triple Entente did not hold this objective due to any military necessity, but instead because there was status associated with the site. Coldly rational, cost-benefit-based military decision making would have recommended withdrawal to far more defensible positions; it also would have prevented the many attacks in and around the city that resulted in horrendous—and likely unnecessary—casualties for all involved.⁸ Much later, in 1917, Ypres remained a focal point for British leadership, although still probably not for reasons of military necessity. As one military historian claimed, “He [Field Marshal Douglas Haig] may have been attached to Ypres for personal reasons,

⁷ David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 63.

⁸ David Stevenson estimates approximately 260,000 casualties on all sides in these early battles around Ypres. This includes what he describes as the “destruction of the old [British Expeditionary Forces] BEF” and on the German side the so-called *Kindermord*, or “massacre of the innocents.” See Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 63–64.

given its importance in 1914 in establishing his reputation.”⁹ Other, more sympathetic historians nonetheless concede that “Haig had his own reasons for wanting to fight around Ypres. It would have been emotionally satisfying, for it was of course at Ypres in 1914 that his reputation with the wider British public had been secured.”¹⁰

A less well-known example of operational decisions driven by status and reputation maximization might be found in the British Army’s crushing defeat in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) in 1915–16. The opportunism and ambition of the Republic of India and General Sir John E. Nixon primarily drove this campaign to seize the territory from the Ottoman Empire for two reasons: first, to use it as “an imperial granary,” and second to “create an ‘immense impression’ elsewhere in Asia . . . offsetting the blows to British prestige at Gallipoli.”¹¹ Ultimately, the plan to seize Mesopotamia was a bottom-up initiative contrary to the strategy of the British War Office and political leadership that was heavily concentrated on the western front.¹² Developed locally, this effort focused on status for the leaders of the government of India, and more importantly, personal status for two ambitious leaders: Nixon, who “made up in ambition for what he lacked in intelligence,” and his operational field commander Sir Charles Townshend.¹³

Major General Charles Townshend, “an inveterate self-advertiser [who was] constantly and actively promoting his own brilliance in the hope of recognition by a grateful country,” presided over the debacle that was the British campaign in Mesopotamia.¹⁴ Indeed, although the town of Kut and greater Mesopotamia were “not important for reasons of military strategy,” Mesopotamia *was* considered important by the government of India for the reasons described above. Townshend oversaw the initial invasion of Mesopotamia and subsequent seizure of Kut in late 1914 as the first steps in a campaign that originally had a limited objective but, after initial success, rapidly expanded to include an explicit overall objective of “tak[ing] Baghdad to boost British

⁹ Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 172.

¹⁰ Gary Sheffield and John Bourne, “Introduction,” in *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters, 1914–18* (London: Phoenix, 2006), 35.

¹¹ Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 99.

¹² Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Viking Adult, 2004), 124.

¹³ Norman F. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 97.

¹⁴ John S. Galbraith, “No Man’s Child: The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914–1916,” *International History Review* 6, no. 3 (1984): 358–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.1984.9640348>; and Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 100.

prestige.”¹⁵ This campaign represents operational warfare executed for reasons unrelated to military necessity; it was instead almost entirely driven by ideas of national prestige that combined with a commander who was laser focused on the idea of honor and personal achievement or status. The result of such a combination was an exceptionally poorly planned and executed campaign that ended with the surrender of more than 13,000 British troops, most of whom did not survive captivity.¹⁶

The operational commanders of World War I were just as status and reputation focused as their strategic counterparts. Indeed, interpersonal conflict abounded here as well. Although he was clearly a strategic-level leader (perhaps *the* strategic level leader on the western front by the end of the war), French general Ferdinand Foch’s personal status competitions primarily manifested at the operational level in 1918. Once the Allies agreed to name him the Supreme Commander on the western front, the status competition that we would expect quickly began to manifest. First, he consistently fought with his nominally subordinate Allied commanders about matters that would otherwise not rise to this level of command. In one sense, this was to be expected, particularly since he was the first generalissimo of his kind and thus almost certain to have difficulties with his “subordinates,” several of whom outranked him. In a different sense, however, this highlights the difficulty of managing decisions down the ranks. David Zabecki describes Foch’s relationship with American general John Pershing as “turn[ing] sour rapidly.”¹⁷ Similarly, the editors of Haig’s war diary considered his relationship with Foch “spiky, but productive.”¹⁸ Haig clearly thought Foch was exceeding the status he deserved, writing in his diary at one point in October 1918 that “Foch is suffering from a swelled head, and thinks himself another Napoleon!”¹⁹

Haig, too, had conflicts with many of his adjacent and nominally peer commanders. Perhaps the best example of such conflict on the British side was between him and Sir John French, initial commander of the British Expeditionary Force. Haig and French had long been acquainted, and by many

¹⁵ Galbraith, “No Man’s Child.”

¹⁶ Notably, however, Townshend was not one of these. As Hew Strachan describes, he “was an exception, living in comfort overlooking the Bosphorus [strait] for the remainder of the war.” Strachan, *The First World War*, 125.

¹⁷ Zabecki, *The Generals’ War*, 101.

¹⁸ Douglas Haig, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters, 1914–18*, ed. Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (London: Phoenix, an imprint of Orion Books, 2006), 368.

¹⁹ Haig, *Douglas Haig*, 482.

accounts almost inextricably intertwined, as they were united on developing (or protecting) the future cavalry force, followed each other in many billets, and at one point Haig even loaned French a sum of £2,000 (equivalent to approximately £250,000 or \$315,000 USD in 2024).²⁰ Despite their preexisting relationship, the surreptitious maneuvering for personal status between the two began early in the war (and perhaps well before). At the very beginning of the crisis that would become World War I, “Haig raised doubts about French to the King as early as 11 August 1914, during George V’s visit to Aldershot [south of London].”²¹ Following a disastrous series of attacks in and around Ypres, Haig replaced French in December 1915, after he acquiesced to (and probably had some part in) a “vicious, if understandable, behind the scenes campaign against French.”²² Did Haig genuinely believe this was for the good of the nation? Almost certainly. Gerard DeGroot reports that “driven though he undoubtedly was, his ambition was made even more formidable by sincere devotion to his profession. In other words, he was certain that he alone knew the right way forward for the Army.”²³ The search for status, particularly in ambitious, high performing leaders, is often confabulated into a narrative of self-sacrifice, support to the nation, and humility.

Pershing, for his part, attested to how the status competition among the generals most obviously manifested, stating in his memoir of the war that “the Belgian Chief of Staff objected to Foch [recommendations for command arrangements] on the ground that a King could not be placed under the command of a Major General. It did not appear to me that the point was well taken, as Haig and [Henri-Philippe] Petain and I were senior in rank to Foch, who after all, held his place by common agreement.”²⁴ The difference in rank—status—between the generals clearly mattered, as Pershing made a point to describe it in more than one place in his memoir. At a minimum, the visible formal status (rank) disparity between generals caused them to bristle, as Pershing described. In other ways, it created legitimate and significant dis-

²⁰ Ian F. W. Beckett, “Haig and French,” in *Haig: A Re-Appraisal 80 Years On*, ed. Brian Bond and Nigel Cave (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2009).

²¹ Sheffield and Bourne, “Introduction,” 4.

²² Philip Langer and Robert Pois, *Command Failure in War: Psychology and Leadership* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 127.

²³ Gerard J. DeGroot, “Ambition, Duty, and Doctrine: Douglas Haig’s Rise to High Command,” in *Haig: A Re-Appraisal 80 Years On*.

²⁴ John J. Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1931), 134.

putes that would shape the direction of the war. It created the most problems *within* the French Army structure, for when Foch was designated Supreme Commander, he was also elevated to a position above the nominal French Army commander, General Henri-Philippe Pétain. This was guaranteed to create conflict about rank, authority, and giving orders. Indeed, it did.

Haig recorded in his diary how French prime minister Georges Clemenceau told him that “it was Petain and Foch who he feared would squabble.”²⁵ This turned out to be prescient. The two French generals fought often, explicitly over status but also about the status of their *ideas*, mirroring some of what we saw in the previous chapter. Pétain and Foch’s explicit status maneuvering culminated in an incident in June 1918, where in an uncommonly direct manifestation of the principal-agent problem Pétain wrote to Foch that “I am informing you that I have no intention of communicating your note of 16 June to the armies under my orders.”²⁶ Simultaneously, the two generals appealed directly to the prime minister, each going over the other’s head. This forced Clemenceau to finalize and clarify the status hierarchy, which he did by confirming Foch as the senior French commander who had authority over Pétain. Foch then made sure Pétain understood who dominated whom in the status hierarchy by employing what David Zabecki called a “cheap shot” by removing (firing) Pétain’s chief of staff, who had consistently been a “thorn in his [Foch’s] side,” without consulting Pétain.²⁷

Beyond jockeying for dominance, however, Pétain and Foch also fought constantly about their ideas of *how* the French Army should fight. Unlike the strategic-level ideas discussed in the last chapter, this manifested primarily at the operational level: a battle of ideas that shaped the course of battle during 1918 and affected national strategy by shaping operational actions. Foch was a true believer in the French “cult of the offensive” prior to World War I. Although he was not one of the primary thinkers who created it, as some have alleged, his writings make it clear that he believed offensive *elan* (enthusiasm)

²⁵ Haig, *Douglas Haig*, 380.

²⁶ Quoted in Zabecki, *The Generals’ War*, 170.

²⁷ Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 377, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511835254>; and Zabecki, *The Generals’ War*.

was critically important, decisive even, for modern war.²⁸ His ideas changed somewhat during the long years of war, but he nonetheless was one to push constantly for offensive battle, particularly in the later months of 1918 when it seemed as if open warfare had returned to the western front. Pétain was the opposite. His mantra was “fire kills,” and he had a well-earned reputation as a general who protected soldiers’ lives dearly.²⁹ This difference of opinion sets up an obvious conflict. These men’s ideas mattered greatly, as much of the status of each general was tied to their theory of warfare. Pétain was the “hero of Verdun;” a battle he was famous for winning while saving many French lives. He later saved the French Army from the disastrous mutinies of 1917 (see chapter 8). Foch, on the other hand, had written several books about modern warfare and was famous for lecturing about the importance of *elan*, the bayonet, and the offensive in general.³⁰

The conflict over tactics between these two men was one of whose idea had higher status. And a conflict it was. Historian of the French Army in World War I, Elizabeth Greenhalgh writes that “there was one ‘fly in the ointment’ during all these changes and improvements within the French Army [in 1918]: relations between Petain and Foch.” She describes the two general’s “complete disagreement” and that Foch meddled in the tactical actions of Pétain’s army to such a degree that Pétain tried to resign.³¹ General Marie Emile Fayolle, a subordinate of Pétain, assessed the relationship between the two even more accurately when he wrote, “There was constant disagreement between Foch and Petain, with Foch always wanting to attack and Petain unwilling.”³² This type of fight—and many other such conflicts over the prestige or dominance of a person, unit, or idea—was and is pervasive. It shaped the operational employment of French and Allied forces in 1918, if only by lim-

²⁸ Michael Howard, “Men Against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 514; and Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War*, trans. Hilaire Belloc (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 365. Here, Foch describes the need for troops to charge en masse.

²⁹ Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War, 1900–1918* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), 254.

³⁰ For a contemporaneous reference to Pétain as the “Hero of Verdun,” see “France,” *Catholic World* 6 (1917): 413. For Foch’s work on modern warfare and the offensive, see Foch, *The Principles of War*.

³¹ Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 292, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511998133>.

³² Quoted in Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War*, 286.

iting the space of available options for Foch. Elsewhere, it mattered because at times Pétain simply refused to execute orders Foch sent him, as described above.

These direct personal conflicts existed at all levels of all armies in World War I. They exist today. At their most foundational level, they are status competitions about which general is right, which is more important, who has the most status, and who will have the opportunity or ability to accrue more. Each of the generals provide this sort of example, and despite the existential nature of the fight, they nonetheless squabbled over seemingly minor and unimportant issues. However, these disagreements were often what shaped operational decisions more than grand strategic pronouncements. John Pershing started a feud with his nominal commander, Chief of Staff of the Army general Peyton C. March, that would last for decades and shape the U.S. military into the next war as many of the United States' leaders in World War II still thought of themselves as "Pershing Men."³³ Decisions made by commanders focused on their self-interest and on status and reputation would be equally evident in many of the most famous commanders of the next great war.

World War II is fertile ground to find operational-level commanders fighting for status. There were any number of occasions where operational commanders sought to maximize their importance at the expense of the nominal strategic design. These operational dynamics of status-seeking are illustrated by Morris Janowitz, who writes that "the strategic decision of Europe first had to face the 'human fact that no general in his right mind wants to be downgraded to a secondary role.' Every general and admiral operating outside the number-one target pushed continuously for a greater share of available military resources."³⁴ Specific examples of this dynamic—operational commanders who nonetheless continue to seek resources, importance, and fame at the expense of the overall strategy—existed in all theaters, whether at the highest end of the ladder where commanders like Dwight D. Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, and Chester W. Nimitz advocated for their theater to take priority over the explicitly declared strategy of the president (see chapter 6) or further down the operational chain.

Perhaps the best example of this is the continued push for ground operations to seize Northern Italy long after Eisenhower departed the Mediterra-

³³ Zabecki, *The Generals' War*, 304.

³⁴ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier, a Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 288.

nean (see chapter 6) and well after they had reached the end of any realistic utility. Although the army group commanders—Field Marshal Harold Alexander and eventually General Mark W. Clark—had the support of the highest echelons of the British command, once American and British forces were fighting on the European peninsula in Summer 1944, it was clear to most observers that further operations in Italy were at best diversionary. Although many historians concede that some continued operations in Italy were necessary to hold German forces there instead of allowing them to reinforce German defenses in Western Europe, the Allied forces' continued assaults on dug-in and static German defenses were almost certainly a vanity project. It was readily apparent to the Allied leadership, and particularly the American leadership, that the most important operational theater was in France at this point. However, the Allied leadership in Italy still fought against their higher echelon commanders when personnel were taken from them to support operations in France, explicitly contradicting the declared strategy of Allied leadership. They also continued to attack and expend much needed troops in what historian Andrew Roberts succinctly described as “a waste of effort after Rome.”³⁵

Much of the status-focused decision making we see in the Italian campaign is best shown in Mark Clark. Historians Williamson Murray and Allan Millett wrote that Clark was “ambitious, ruthless with subordinates, profligate with the lives of his soldiers, unsympathetic to the difficulties of other Allied armies, and more impressed with style than substance.”³⁶ As one of his American contemporaries, Army general Jacob L. Devers said, “He thinks he’s God Almighty.”³⁷ Historians generally accept that Clark was almost entirely self-interested. He was a serial self-promoter who sought to increase his personal glory and fame, readily disobeying orders when he thought it would provide him increased status.

The most glaring example was the seizure of Rome in June 1944, where he flagrantly and deliberately ignored the orders of Field Marshal Alexander, the Army Group commander, to cut off the retreating German Army. As

³⁵ Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 2001), 386–87; and Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West, 1941–1945* (New York: Harper, 2009), 578.

³⁶ Murray and Millett, *A War to Be Won*, 378.

³⁷ Gen Jacob Devers, quoted in Ricks, *The Generals*, 71.

his subordinate Lieutenant General Lucian K. Truscott wrote in his memoir, “He [Clark] was irked at General Alexander’s ‘interference . . .’ and [he] was determined that the British were not going to be the first in Rome.”³⁸ Instead of following Alexander’s orders, Clark made a dash to seize the city, informing Alexander that “if the British tried to approach Rome before the Americans, he would order ‘his troops to fire on the Eighth Army’.”³⁹ Interestingly, operations in Italy provide plentiful examples of self-interested behavior in echelons below Clark as well. In a particularly glaring example of the principal-agent problem, in the assault on Monte Cassino in May 1944 (Operation Diadem), his direct subordinate French Army general Alphonse Juin “showed a mutual disrespect for Clark’s plans [to assault the German stronghold of Monte Cassino], and in French fashion, proceeded to march off on his own line of attack.”⁴⁰

These types of personal glory decisions were endemic during World War II, as they are in all wars and in peacetime militaries as well. Mark Clark represents one of the most notable examples of this status-seeking behavior, but there are many more. American Army general George S. Patton and British general Bernard L. Montgomery, two of the war’s most famous operational commanders, provide a multitude of examples of similar behavior. In Sicily, the two commanders regularly conflicted, not about decisions of military necessity, but instead about which one would seize “important” objectives, who would receive the most plaudits, and ultimately which one had higher status.⁴¹ These two commanders were famous for cultivating their own personal image. As chapter 6 covers, each chose unique identifiers that they intentionally used to increase their fame and status within and beyond their armies. Patton had his ivory handled pistols and Montgomery flaunted his black beret (with a possibly contrived backstory to go with it); there were many other generals in World War II who similarly sought to cultivate their own image. The previous chapter discussed General Matthew Ridgway and Nazi leader Hermann Göring; other famous examples include General Doug-

³⁸ Lucian K. Truscott Jr., *Command Missions: A Personal Story* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1954), 369.

³⁹ Quoted in Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 402. The provenance and accuracy of this quote is debated, but the overall intent and sentiment have never been questioned.

⁴⁰ Murray and Millett, *A War to Be Won*, 385.

⁴¹ Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943–1944* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), 121–35.

las MacArthur (corncob pipe and crushed uniform hat) and Air Force general Curtis E. LeMay (cigar), among many others.⁴² Both of these generals also aggressively sought to manage their reputation after the war ended, although Patton died shortly after. Patton, for his part, revised and edited his personal journal in a fashion similar to Douglas Haig; he knew it would be of historical interest, and thus sought to protect his reputation in every way possible.⁴³

The legendary race between Patton and Montgomery is the most well-known of their status competitions. They shamelessly raced to be the first general to reach the city of Messina, Italy. This episode, famously dramatized by the 1970 Academy Award winning film, *Patton*, regularly saw the film's namesake "meddling with the corps commander's tactical prerogatives simply to beat Montgomery into Messina," executing operations that General Omar Bradley considered " 'trivial' and even 'foolhardy'." ⁴⁴ To be clear, two ground force commanders deliberately risked the lives of their soldiers to ensure they were first into a city that had only limited strategic or operational value. In some accounts, this race not only risked the lives of many soldiers, but also made Allied forces focus on the objective of Messina, and not the German effort to withdraw to the Italian mainland. Instead of isolating German forces and preventing their withdrawal to Italy, the Allies would have to fight these same Germans again on the Italian mainland.⁴⁵

Foolhardy decisions in support of personal status were far from the sole province of ground commanders. What nearly became one of the most catastrophic naval decisions in history was a result of similar motivations. Author Evan Thomas describes Admiral William Halsey as a "mythmaker," who often elaborated on his personal status, though occasionally to his regret.⁴⁶ Although Halsey was not racing against another commander like Patton or

⁴² For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Roger Beaumont, "Command Method: A Gap in Military Historiography," *Naval War College Review* 32, no. 1 (1979): 70. He notes that this was such a well-known occurrence in the early twentieth century that it had a specific catch phrase: flat catching.

⁴³ Daniel Feldmann, "Fixing One's History: George S. Patton's Changes in His Personal Diary," *War in History* 28, no. 1 (January 2021): 166–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344518820363>.

⁴⁴ *Patton*, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, starring George C. Scott and Karl Malden (Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 1970); and Atkinson, *The Day of Battle*, 162.

⁴⁵ Albert N. Garland, Howard McGaw Smyth, and Martin Blumenson, *The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Sicily and the Surrender of Italy*, U.S. Army in World War II (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1993), 409–14.

⁴⁶ Evan Thomas, *Sea of Thunder: Four Commanders and the Last Great Naval Campaign, 1941–1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 36–37.

Montgomery, at the Battle of Leyte Gulf (October 1944)—the largest naval battle in history—he was nonetheless at least partly focused on relative status. Halsey nearly commanded what would have been the largest operational failure for the U.S. Navy in World War II; and there is a convincing argument to be made that he was seeking personal status, perhaps hoping to one-up (or at least avoid what the mistakes of) fleet commander Admiral Raymond A. Spruance. In Halsey's view, Spruance missed the opportunity for a victory as the fleet commander off the coast of Saipan in 1943, where he did not seek a climactic battle with the remaining Japanese aircraft carriers. Spruance had been tasked with protecting the U.S. Marines ashore and defending the landing. When the Japanese fleet arrived with its aircraft carriers, Spruance fought them in the Battle of the Philippine Sea (June 1944) but remained focused on his primary mission.⁴⁷ Halsey, along with many others in the Pacific Fleet, saw this as a mistake. Historians Williamson Murray and Allan Millet claim the decision “sent naval aviators into apoplexy years afterward.”⁴⁸ Much like the Imperial Japanese Navy, Halsey was consumed with the idea of destroying enemy prestige targets, or in this case, the Japanese aircraft carriers he thought Spruance had neglected. After he reassumed command of the fleet from Spruance, he focused solely on the “assumption that the prime purpose of any operation whatsoever in the Western Pacific was to bring about a climactic battle, to settle the question of supremacy in sea power.”⁴⁹

The Battle of Leyte Gulf offered Halsey just such an opportunity. During the landings of U.S. forces on Leyte in the Philippines, the Japanese Navy opted to assault the naval forces supporting the landing with everything they had left. The Japanese divided their available naval power into three task forces, approaching the landing from roughly north, west, and south. Halsey opted to leave the landing support force to fend for itself and go after the Japanese carriers, exactly the decision he thought Spruance should have made during the Battle of Saipan. Unfortunately for Halsey, the Japanese carrier force approaching from the north that he opted to engage with his entire fleet

⁴⁷ Symonds, *World War II at Sea*, 544–52.

⁴⁸ Murray and Millet, *A War to Be Won*, 359.

⁴⁹ Adm Robert B. Carney, Halsey's chief of staff, quoted in Thomas, *Sea of Thunder*, 127. Notably, as the war continued, Japanese aircraft carriers became increasingly irrelevant due to fuel and pilot shortages (among other issues). Although Halsey and many in the U.S. Navy remained fixated on them, their destruction was far from a prerequisite for the United States' ultimate victory.

was a decoy. The real fight was in and around the landing area at Leyte Gulf and the result was almost catastrophic.⁵⁰

As soon as the opportunity presented itself, Halsey left the smaller, less capable landing support force and “made the bizarre decision to throw the whole of his gigantic third fleet at the puny decoy force presented by Admiral Jusaburo Ozawa in the far north,” a decision “which was not only wrong, but foolish.”⁵¹ As the battle played out, the extraordinary heroism of the small carriers and escorts Halsey left behind, paired with mistakes on the Japanese side, limited much of the damage Halsey’s action might otherwise have incurred.⁵² However, his reaction to the debacle is telling; he was apoplectic about what he considered the public insult by his higher headquarters during the near catastrophe, and wrote a message trying to explain and vindicate his actions even before the battle was over; and, redolent of the aftermath of the Battle of Jutland (1916), almost as soon as the smoke cleared he worked to protect his personal reputation, seeking to “declare a massive victory and move on.”⁵³ He would continue this fight for the rest of his life, feuding openly with other naval officers, analysts, and historians. Only once would he ever admit, albeit obliquely, that his actions at Leyte Gulf were not as they should have been.⁵⁴

Not to be outdone, the Navy-Marine Corps team took part in their own status-seeking operational debacles in the Pacific. The invasion of Peleliu in November 1944 is the most flagrant example. One of the most horrific amphibious assaults of the Pacific War, it was almost certainly unnecessary. Admiral Halsey implored Admiral Nimitz to call off the invasion, and it became eminently clear in hindsight that the island could have, and should have,

⁵⁰ Ian W. Toll, *Twilight of the Gods: War in the Western Pacific, 1944–1945* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 246–300. For book-length discussions of the Battle of Leyte Gulf see Thomas, *Sea of Thunder*; and Samuel Eliot Morison, *Leyte: June 1944–January 1945*, vol. 12, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958).

⁵¹ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Pearson, 1974), 450.

⁵² Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 451–63.

⁵³ Walter R. Borneman, *The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King—The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 400; and Elmer Belmont Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 344. In his memoir, Halsey describes this dynamic exactly. See William Frederick Halsey and J. Bryan, *Admiral Halsey’s Story* (n.p.: P-47 Press, 2019).

⁵⁴ Thomas, *Sea of Thunder*, 345–48.

been bypassed.⁵⁵ Ian Toll suggests, however, there was likely more at stake than military necessity. The inter-Service rivalry endemic in the Pacific at the time, the short window of availability of the 1st Marine Division and resource disputes between Nimitz's Central Pacific area and MacArthur's South Pacific area make it likely that Service and theater status competition was at least partially responsible for the decision to invade Peleliu instead of simply bypassing it. This was a decision Toll describes as "tragically mistaken in hindsight."⁵⁶ At the cost of more than 20,000 casualties on both sides, almost nothing was gained from this invasion except another notch in the ongoing competition between the Marines and Navy on one side, and MacArthur and the Army on the other.

The Marine Corps had its share of interpersonal and inter-Service conflicts as well (often both at the same time). Rarely discussed except by historians and students of the Pacific War today, in the 1940s the "Smith vs Smith" controversy was known by any who followed the war closely.⁵⁷ In the middle of the Battle of Saipan in June 1944, Marine Corps lieutenant general Holland M. Smith, commander of the V Amphibious Corps, determined that Major General Ralph C. Smith, commander of the U.S. Army's 27th Infantry Division, was not moving quickly enough and relieved him of command. This brought to a head several entangled inter-Service battles, most of which show status-seeking dynamics on the part of many commanders and their Services. At one level, this battle was a public argument about who should have overall command in the Pacific—the Navy or the Army—fought by proxy and mostly in the press with flawed information. At the Service level, the Marines were certainly interested in proving their ability to direct and provide command and control to large formations. Conversely, the Army argued that the Marine Corps had no business commanding at higher echelons.⁵⁸ At the individual level, it appears that there were many on both sides who stood to gain from the controversy; for example, Harry A. Gailey, historian of the event describes that, "aside from the possible merits of his arguments [against Marines leading higher echelon commands], it was obvious

⁵⁵ Jeter A. Isley and Philip A. Crowl, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory and Its Practice in the Pacific* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 1979), 428–31.

⁵⁶ Toll, *Twilight of the Gods*, 128–29.

⁵⁷ For a book-length treatment of this episode, see Harry A. Gailey, *"Howlin Mad" vs the Army: Conflict in Command, Saipan, 1944* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986).

⁵⁸ Norman V. Cooper, *A Fighting General: Biography of General Holland M. Smith* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corp Association, 1987), 203–4.

that General [Robert C.] Richardson had a personal stake in downgrading the Marines.” Richardson, senior Army commander in Hawaii, had an obvious interest in this conflict, as removing Marines from higher command would open the way for his own battlefield command opportunity.⁵⁹

The Smith versus Smith battle exacerbated the ongoing Service fights at different echelons, and simultaneously exacerbated individual antipathy between Marine and Army commanders directly involved as well as those who were only in the general orbit of the event. Commanders like Admiral Richmond K. Turner, Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, and Army Lieutenant General Robert Richardson, who “had been trying to undermine Holland Smith’s position since the latter’s arrival in the Pacific,” were all sucked into this battle, and each of them fought for their own personal status prerogatives.⁶⁰ Holland Smith, in particular, wrote a flawed and self-serving memoir that generally attributed the animus and conflict created by the incident to inter-Service rivalries. Even if this was the case, and personal status-seeking played no part, this event would still be an excellent example of status competition. As Smith wrote in his memoir, “Inter-Service disputes, given unmerited prominence, can grow into the greatest enemy of victory when they take priority over all other interests in the minds of Generals and Admirals.”⁶¹

The controversy continued to poison relations between the Army, Marine Corps, and Navy, and the “furor did not subside until the Joint Chiefs intervened and the commandant of the Marine Corps agreed to push [Holland] Smith upstairs to a nonoperational assignment.”⁶² This was far from a one-time conflict, as it came to the forefront again during the Battle of Okinawa when 10th Army commander lieutenant general Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. was killed and replaced by Marine general Roy S. Geiger. The Army, not wanting to leave a Marine general in command of a mixed field army for any longer than absolutely necessary after the Smith controversy, wasted no time in replacing Geiger. Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell assumed command on Okinawa a short five days later.⁶³ After this event and much negative press about the Battle of Okinawa, bad blood continued between the Services; many in the Army particularly believed that “the Marine Corps

⁵⁹ Gailey, “*Howlin Mad*” vs the Army, 3.

⁶⁰ Cooper, *A Fighting General*, 204.

⁶¹ Holland M. Smith and Percy Finch, *Coral and Brass* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), 168.

⁶² Murray and Millett, *A War to Be Won*, 360.

⁶³ Roy E. Applebaum et al., *Okinawa: The Last Battle*, United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1948), 461.

had once again pulled a public relations coup at the Army's expense."⁶⁴ Many soldiers and supporters of the Army felt that they had been denied status and reputation that was rightly theirs and, like the hunter-gatherers from chapter 4, that the Marine Corps had accrued status that the Service had no right to accumulate. These lingering status and reputation dynamics would fester and play both implicit and occasionally explicit roles in the post-World War II Service unification fights discussed in the previous chapter, where many—if not most—in the Army advocated for what would essentially amount to the elimination of the U.S. Marine Corps.⁶⁵

The final example from World War II is neither American nor particularly interested in land or sea combat. Sir Arthur Travers Harris, the air officer commander in chief of the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command during most of World War II, shaped the operational employment of British forces within his branch and beyond as well as played a large part in affecting the course of operational decision making before and after the Normandy invasion in Europe. Harris' fealty to the status of an idea greatly reflects many of the examples seen earlier in this chapter and in chapter 6. In one sense, Harris fits more in the previous chapter. Indeed, as historian Robin Neillands describes, "Harris was the living embodiment of the 'bomber dream,' the theory that bombing could win wars without the need for land offensives and perhaps, by taking wars off the battlefield and into the homes of the civilian population make war itself impossible."⁶⁶ This line of thinking was far from unique to Harris, and chapter 6 briefly mentions the status of the airpower idea as one that certainly shaped World War II and military operations since.

The status of this idea mattered greatly in the operational sense as well. Even as it became clear that land invasion would be necessary to defeat Nazi Germany, Harris held firm to the idea that it was not only undesirable, but would in fact detract from the more important mission of strategic bombing of cities. Richard J. Overy describes how Harris "contested, often bitterly, any attempt to divert the forces under his command to other purposes and when compelled to do so, fought to have his bombers returned to what he saw as their only rational function as soon as possible."⁶⁷ Field Marshal Alan Francis Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff, described Harris' position on the

⁶⁴ Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 438.

⁶⁵ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 456–64.

⁶⁶ Robin Neillands, *The Bomber War: The Allied Air Offensive against Nazi Germany* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2001), 104.

⁶⁷ Richard J. Overy, *The Air War: 1939–45* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 287.

invasion of Europe as “how well he might have won the war had it not been for the handicap imposed by the existence of the other two services.”⁶⁸

The important points here are twofold: first, Harris had a “singleminded pursuit of strategic bombing that came close to obsession”; and second, his continued advocacy of this method arguably siphoned forces and focus away from what should have been the main effort of the war—Operation Overlord, the June 1944 amphibious assault on Normandy.⁶⁹ A U.S. Air Force official history concedes that “in general, the strategic bomber commanders—British as well as American—believed that any diversion from their strategic air campaign against the Nazi heartland weakened their effort,” and was thus a distraction.⁷⁰ Richard Overy goes even further, claiming that Harris, American general Carl A. Spaatz, commander of Strategic Air Forces in Europe, and General Ira C. Eaker, commander of Eighth Air Force, saw complementary bombing in support of the ground campaign to defeat Nazi Germany as a “radical step.”⁷¹ Despite the clearly stated strategy and operational approach, an established Supreme Commander in Europe (Eisenhower), and a unified effort, Allied forces were unable to devote all their efforts to a collective, rationally decided, best course of action. The shaping of operations by those, like Harris, who continually advocated for their own status and interest (or their Service’s interest, in this case) was a constant throughout the existential wars of the twentieth century.

Wars of Choice

As the theory presented here highlights, self-interested status-seeking behavior that shapes operational decisions is also endemic in *wars of choice*.⁷² The theory suggests that we should find at least as many examples of this sort of

⁶⁸ Quoted in Stephen Budiansky, *Air Power: The Men, Machines, and Ideas that Revolutionized War, from Kitty Hawk to Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 299.

⁶⁹ Robin Neillands, “Facts and Myths about Bomber Harris,” *RUSI Journal: Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies* 146, no. 2 (April 2001): 69–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840108446632>.

⁷⁰ Richard P. Hallion, *The U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II: D-Day 1944, Air Power over the Normandy Beaches and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1994), 25.

⁷¹ Overy, *The Air War: 1939–45*, 115–18.

⁷² For the purposes of this volume, a *war of choice* is one fought for national interests that do not include existential threats to the nation. This, too, is often similar to Justice Potter’s “know it when you see it,” and the author concedes that there can be wildly differing opinions on which conflicts were fought by choice and which were fought of necessity.

behavior in *small wars* and also during times of relative peace.⁷³ The number of examples available seems to support this contention. The Vietnam War provides the first, and perhaps best, examples to support it. As already discussed, in Vietnam the U.S. military Services' leaders were willing to disregard (or at least negotiate) overall strategic effectiveness to better accrue status, reputation, and power to their respective Services. These dynamics were at least equally common within the operational-level leadership of the war.

The operational level leaders of the Vietnam effort certainly thought a great deal about status. In a telling passage, Bernard Brodie describes how Army general Maxwell D. Taylor, President John F. Kennedy's military advisor, later Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and finally ambassador to South Vietnam, thought of this topic.⁷⁴ He writes, "General Taylor shows himself to be at all times enormously impressed with the importance of retaining prestige and with what he considers to be the requirements thereof."⁷⁵ General William C. Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and inveterate prestige seeker, was described by one historian as "fueled by ambition . . . effective at self-promotion, and skillful in cultivating influential sponsors." He goes on to quote an unnamed officer who described Westmoreland as "awed by his own magnificence."⁷⁶

The now-common element of ambitious leaders who are well known status-seekers is clearly present in the operational military leadership of the Vietnam War. This was neither unique to the theater nor any particular Service however. These dynamics show up in a much-loved Marine leader of

⁷³ This volume generally applies the definition of *small war* found in the U.S. Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual*: "As applied to the United States, small wars are operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation. Obviously expansive, this definition fits all of the United States' post World War II conflicts. *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1990), 1.

⁷⁴ Although Taylor arguably had more influence and input at the strategic level, he was also influential at the level of discrete operational events within Vietnam. More importantly, he had significant intellectual influence on many of his subordinates during the Vietnam years and before. Most well-known of these subordinates is William Westmoreland, who became the primary operational artist behind the most prominently known parts of the war. See Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷⁵ Brodie, *War and Politics*, 193.

⁷⁶ Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2011), xvii.

the era, Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, whose biographer refers to him as “a fabulist who craved recognition, concocted stories, and added untrue events to his highly decorated career.”⁷⁷ Krulak’s memoir/history, *First to Fight*, is simultaneously a tour de force adored by the Marine Corps and yet also notable for its author’s description of his own crucial personal involvement in seemingly every important event that occurred in the Marine Corps during the years before and after World War II.⁷⁸ The leaders of this era, and the other strategic and operational leaders we have seen, should not be impugned for their ambition or cultivation of personal status however. To the contrary, we should recognize these factors and understand that they provide examples of a phenomenon common to every member of the military hierarchy. Indeed, instead of malicious or negative, these dynamics are simply a fact. Self-interested status and reputation maximizing behavior is the sine qua non of military service.

As already seen, however, such an interpretation manifests in ways far beyond self-interested memoirs or biographers and contemporaries who describe extreme ambition or self-promotion. It shows up in the way operations happen, for better or for worse. In the Vietnam War, it manifested in what one author called “almost pornographic pandering to the American lust for numbers pretending to be facts.”⁷⁹ This became widely known in colloquial terms as *body counts*, but was formally called by the more dissembling “exchange ratio” or “kill ratio.”⁸⁰ The creation of a single critical metric for assessing success in the war established what Scott Sigmund Gardner called the “dominant indicator” approach. He argues that, in wartime, organizations often choose specific quantifiable measurements that subsequently shape

⁷⁷ Robert Coram, *Brute: The Life of Victor Krulak, U.S. Marine* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2010).

⁷⁸ See Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999). For example, Krulak *was* certainly involved in the defense unification battles of 1944–47, but his influence was surely as limited as any other lieutenant colonel and likely not the leading role he attributes to himself in his memoir. See Gordon W. Keiser, *The U.S. Marine Corps and Defense Unification, 1944–47: The Politics of Survival* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1982). Of course, the framing of this book would also allow that his individual decisions also shaped and developed policy from the bottom up.

⁷⁹ Larry Cable, quoted in Scott Sigmund Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 117.

⁸⁰ Leo McCann, “‘Killing Is Our Business and Business Is Good’: The Evolution of ‘War Managerialism’ from Body Counts to Counterinsurgency,” *Organization (London)* 24, no. 4 (2017): 491–515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417693852>.

their preferred wartime strategies.⁸¹ Body counts were exactly that. As public choice theory and the principal-agent literature suggests, since this was the metric that the Army had chosen to use to measure success, self-interested commanders throughout the chain of command had incentives to maximize it in any way possible, even if that meant acting in ways contrary to the ultimate strategy. Leo McCann describes how “it was extremely well known that Vietnam body count numbers were routinely inflated at each level of the chain of command.”⁸²

And yet, the metric remained the Army’s preferred indicator, with operational commanders at each level seeking to show their commanders how well they were meeting or exceeding the numerical goals associated with it. As Air Force major general Edward G. Lansdale described in one post-war panel, “The Americans became stuck with a bookkeeper’s mentality,” generating tons of “arithmetical reports” whose “very profusion influenced the military to upgrade the importance of attriting the enemy.”⁸³ Self-interested management and manipulation of numbers paired with the dominant indicator of body counts “fostered a massive amount of killing, which ultimately worked against the strategy of winning the people’s hearts and minds.”⁸⁴ More precisely, the plan to use attrition (body counts) to defeat the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and South Vietnamese insurgent forces during the Vietnam War was fundamentally at odds with the effort to enable the government of the Republic of Vietnam to gain legitimacy and defeat the ongoing insurgency in the country.

Although in retrospect the attritional approach was flawed, *ex ante* it was one that *had* been thought through. However, organizational leadership did not just understand it as one among many possible strategies; instead, operational leaders sought to obfuscate and even frame the strategy in a positive light. In previous wars, the business of killing as many enemies as possible might have been understood as something unpleasant, but nonetheless the price of doing business, while quantitative indicators might have been kept as one of many ways to seek to discover whether the operational approach

⁸¹ Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War*.

⁸² McCann, “‘Killing Is Our Business and Business Is Good’.”

⁸³ Edward Lansdale, panelist in Donaldson D. Frizzell, “The Strategy of Attrition,” in *Lessons of Vietnam*, ed. W. Scott Thompson (New York: Crane Russak, 1977), 77.

⁸⁴ Leo J. Blanken and Jason J. Lepore, “Principals, Agents, and Assessment,” in *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure*, ed. Leo J. Blanken, Hy Rothstein, and Jason J. Lepore (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 12.

was working. In Vietnam, this was not the case. Instead, status-maximizing leaders sought to distort and reframe the strategy, metrics, and indeed, nearly every public discussion about body counts into something positive using a “numbing glossolalia of techno-speak.”⁸⁵ Importantly, in earlier conflicts, metrics and indicators were often kept within military headquarters; in Vietnam, however, the military and the Department of Defense made a concerted effort to spin indicators for presentation to the public in the best possible light. In Bernard Brodie’s words, during the Vietnam War, the military was responsible for “consistent and endless distortion of events on the side of optimism.”⁸⁶ Although the military was probably not as mendacious as many framed it during and immediately following the war, it nonetheless perpetrated what Vietnam War historian Gregory Daddis characterized as a “salesmanship campaign.”⁸⁷ This is exactly as the theory of status-seeking and reputation management would predict; the important thing was not the actual winning, but instead it was gaining status and protecting reputation.

The final example from the Vietnam War is also the worst. It shows self-interested behavior of an entire chain of command at the expense of the national interest, the overall war effort, and individual soldiers. The My Lai Massacre occurred on 16 March 1968. Members of an ad hoc task force, Task Force Barker, conducted a clearing operation in a town known to the U.S. military as “Pinkville” or My Lai 4. After entering the town at approximately 0800 in the morning, members of the infantry platoon tasked to clear the village began slaughtering civilians. Although the exact number of civilians killed remains unclear, the Peers Inquiry, a U.S. Army review of the incident, states that later criminal investigations found that the number of civilians

⁸⁵ Joanna Bourke, “War and Violence,” *Thesis Eleven* 86, no. 1 (August 2006): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513606066238>.

⁸⁶ Brodie, *War and Politics*, 194.

⁸⁷ Gregory A. Daddis, “Choosing Progress: Evaluating the ‘Salesmanship’ of the Vietnam War in 1967,” in *Assessing War*, 173. The alternative view, of a “malicious” military might be seen in a quote from David Halberstam in the same chapter. Halberstam states that “the American military apparatus in Vietnam became a vast lying machine, telling Washington what Washington wanted to hear and insisted upon hearing. The purpose of this lying machine was to propagandize our alleged progress in the war and to convince Congress and the American public to support the war.”

killed may have exceeded 400 (along with rapes and other crimes).⁸⁸ Despite the atrocities of that day and immediate reporting of the incident to multiple chains of command, somehow, it did not become known outside of the immediate superiors responsible for it for *years*.⁸⁹ Even after it became public, much of the cover-up, obfuscation, and self-preservation undertaken by the chain of command did not make it into the public discourse, largely because of the behavior of the Army and the servicemembers who were involved in hiding the event. Journalist and historian Thomas E. Ricks writes that “the My-Lai Massacre has lived on in American memory . . . but only as an instance of a rogue platoon led by a dimwitted lieutenant.”⁹⁰

The part that most Americans remember is not wrong; however, the element of the massacre that has faded from memory is the more important part of the story for the purposes of this discussion. After the massacre, nearly every commander and many staff officers in the chain of command were complicit in covering up the event. Multiple general officers, including Army major general Samuel A. Koster, the division commander, were found to have had some part in the cover-up. Each officer in the chain of command clearly chose their own personal status and reputation over that of the Army and the nation. As the congressional inquiry into the event found, “There was a surprising and almost unbelievable lack of recollection on the part of many of the Subcommittee witnesses whose responsibility to investigate the original My Lai allegations should have caused a more lasting impression on their minds as to the incidents and events involved.” It went on to state directly that “it can reasonably be concluded that the My Lai matter was ‘covered up’.”⁹¹

Perhaps the only officer who obviously did not seek to protect himself or his reputation was Chief Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson, who risked his own personal safety to stop the massacre and who was deliberately smeared in public and attacked as a traitor. Ricks eloquently describes how the Army

⁸⁸ *Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident*, vol. 1, *The Report of the Investigation* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1970), 2–6. The Peers Inquiry was named for its leader from the Department of the Army, LtGen William R. Peers.

⁸⁹ Investigation of the My Lai Incident Report of the Armed Services Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d Sess. (15 July 1970), 6–7.

⁹⁰ Ricks, *The Generals*, 293.

⁹¹ Investigation of the My Lai Incident Report of the Armed Services Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, 5–7.

also declined to hold the majority of the officers involved in the incident and subsequent cover-up accountable for their actions, first condoning, and then hiding, the massacre largely in a misguided attempt to protect its own reputation. Ultimately, the report produced about the massacre was treated exactly as public choice thinking would predict: it was intentionally kept out of the public eye. Indeed, when the lead investigator of the incident, General William Peers, “turned in the results of his investigation, it was accompanied by a letter expressing serious concern about officer morality. [General William] Westmoreland immediately classified the letter ‘secret’ and called for a staff study of military professionalism.”⁹² Although the findings were briefed throughout the Service along with the subsequent study on professionalism, the Army did all it could to protect its institutional reputation by keeping them from the public eye. There was a five-year delay before the findings of General Peers’ inquiry were fully released.⁹³ Ultimately, as Peers wrote in his memoir, “The failure to bring to justice those who participated in the tragedy or were negligent in following it up, however, casts grave doubts upon the efficacy of American justice—military and civilian alike.”⁹⁴ In this case, the Army’s efforts to protect its reputation were at least somewhat successful, since as Ricks described, the larger conspiracy surrounding the My Lai Massacre has been largely forgotten by the American public.⁹⁵

The My Lai Massacre is one of the darkest episodes in U.S. military history, certainly since the end of World War II. There is no example that reaches the depravity of the act or the sheer cynicism of the cover-up. However, examples of status maximizing and reputation protection are common since the Vietnam War as well. The U.S. military may have learned from the war crime of My Lai, but whether the lessons learned from the cover-up were truly inculcated is more debatable. Many within the military, and the public writ large, saw Operation Desert Storm as a redemption from the taint of Vietnam. Although it showed that the U.S. military could win at the operational level, a full redemption it was not. The war was tactically and operationally successful, but its overall outcome has been oft debated, and with the hindsight of three decades it appears to be far from the success many once claimed it to be. More importantly for the discussion here, it showed all

⁹² James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 634.

⁹³ LtGen W. R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 244–45.

⁹⁴ Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry*, xii.

⁹⁵ Ricks, *The Generals*, 292–314.

the hallmarks of status-seeking for self-interest that we have come to expect.

The U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps, initially only minor players in the U.S. Central Command war plan, did exactly what the reader should expect by now. They each lobbied aggressively to be given larger parts in the effort—operational plan and strategy be damned.⁹⁶ The overall operational commander, U.S. Army general Norman Schwarzkopf, had many of the personality traits that readers have come to recognize. Historian Andrew Bacevich writes that “to an unhealthy extent, Schwarzkopf shared [General Douglas] MacArthur’s penchant for theatrics.”⁹⁷ In addition to the standard theatrical self-promotion, he also oversaw multiple conflicts between the Services and different commands under his purview. Throughout the course of the war, Schwarzkopf expended incredible effort to control the narrative of the fight presented to the media and the American public, and after the war sought to enhance his reputation by whatever means necessary, including denigrating his active duty subordinates in a self-serving autobiography where he “gave himself the lion’s share of credit for the allies’ success.”⁹⁸ As the ground commander, he had significant personal conflicts with many of these subordinates, and exacerbated them by sentimentally favoring some over others, such as his insistence on using Lieutenant General John J. Yeosock as his intermediary instead of his subordinate commander Lieutenant General Frederick M. Franks.⁹⁹ Did this affect the way the conflict played out? In this case, it might be debatable, given the overwhelming U.S. materiel and technical superiority. However, it does seem clear that Schwarzkopf’s focus on narrative management and conflicts with his subordinates degraded the efficiency of the overall effort, if nothing else.

Only a decade later, the U.S. military embarked on its post-9/11 wars, where operational commanders during the course of the decades-long efforts showed self-referential status-seeking and reputation management just like their predecessors, with several popular leaders who carefully cultivated their

⁹⁶ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The American Military: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 113.

⁹⁷ Andrew J. Bacevich, *America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016), 120.

⁹⁸ Michael R. Gordon and Gen Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1995), 464. For Schwarzkopf’s memoir, see Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero: The Autobiography of General Norman Schwarzkopf* (New York: Random House, 1993).

⁹⁹ Ricks, *The Generals*, 381.

personal image “taking on a celebrity aura,” like Army general David H. Petraeus, Army lieutenant general H. R. McMaster, and Marine Corps general James N. Mattis.¹⁰⁰ Some took their efforts at seeking the limelight too far, like Army general Stanley A. McChrystal’s immolation in the pages of *Rolling Stone* due to his staff’s extremely open and poorly considered engagement with reporter Michael Hastings.¹⁰¹ The different Services happily participated in the act, as the Marine Corps consistently showed its own penchant for self-promotion and pseudo-Services like the Navy SEALs proved there was no such thing as a book deal or movie they did not love.

Aside from individual status-seekers, the military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan resembled the Vietnam War in many ways. Like Vietnam, the incentives to obfuscate negative reporting and distort it to provide an optimistic picture of military operations were overwhelming. As *The Washington Post* reporter Craig Whitlock recorded in *The Afghanistan Papers*, “In lessons learned interviews, U.S. military officials and advisers described explicit and sustained efforts to deliberately mislead the public. They said it was common in the field, at military headquarters in Kabul, at the Pentagon and at the White House.”¹⁰² Whitlock reports, “At military headquarters, ‘truth was rarely welcome’ and ‘bad news was often stifled,’ [U.S. Army colonel Bob] Crowley said.”¹⁰³ The authors of *Wreckonomics* describe how “if we consider, briefly, the incentives for those deployed militarily in Afghanistan, we find that career success was quite compatible with endemic failure which, moreover, created incentives to present the war in the rosiest light possible. U.S. diplomats tended to say that they themselves were doing a good job, and so did army brigade and battalion commanders.”¹⁰⁴

The operational commanders of the Vietnam War did all they could to manage military and Service reputations in the 1960s and 1970s, and the same could be said of the operational commanders (and every echelon below)

¹⁰⁰ Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military after Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 170.

¹⁰¹ The *Rolling Stone* articles later became a book by Michael Hastings, *The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America’s War in Afghanistan* (New York: Plume, and imprint of Penguin Random House, 2012); and subsequently lampooned in the Netflix movie *War Machine*, directed by David Michôd, starring Brad Pitt (Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2017).

¹⁰² Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 204.

¹⁰³ Bob Crowley, quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 204.

¹⁰⁴ Ruben Andersson and David Keen. *Wreckonomics: Why It’s Time to End the War on Everything* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 178.

of the war in Afghanistan during the 2000s and 2010s. This reflexive protection of reputation—by each Service and the military as a whole—intersected perfectly with the self-interest of individual servicemembers. Whitlock reports that “military officers and diplomats hesitated to pass negative assessments up the chain of command for another reason: careerism. Nobody wanted the blame for the problems or failings on their watch.”¹⁰⁵ Public choice theory would expect nothing less.

More perniciously, the cracks in the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 began to show in these modern conflicts. Goldwater-Nichols was the law designed to fix the many inter-Service problems that became clear in Vietnam and then later during the 1970s and early 1980s. The failure of Operation Eagle Claw (chapter 2) was one of the major catalysts. Although this reorganization of the Department of Defense in the 1980s had a number of useful effects, particularly limiting the inter-Service competition that had previously hamstrung the U.S. military establishment (an example of the self-interest predicted by this theory), it also became clear that with the creation of two separate chains of command, operational leaders who worked at the intersection of Service and theater headquarters would be able to manipulate the structure in ways to benefit their self-interest.

There were many places in the modern era where this problem became evident. Army general Wesley K. Clark’s efforts to play NATO against the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in the late 1990s is the proto-example. Of course, this was not new even then. In Vietnam, for example, the Marines regularly sought to use the Service chain of command and Lieutenant General Krulak when USMACV orders did not suit them, but it became endemic in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁶ Commanders at all levels in these conflicts would regularly appeal to either Service or operational commanders when they felt the need to deviate from the other’s orders; it has now become such a regular

¹⁰⁵ Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 205.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 229–73, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511664960>; and Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 335–60.

occurrence in the U.S. military that it is rather unremarkable.¹⁰⁷ It is common to see planning and operations efforts that intentionally use diametrically opposed guidance from two or more higher echelon commanders in ways that best suit the unit's (and thus its leader's) personal preferences or desires.

It is important to note that neither public choice theory nor this volume pass judgment; indeed, they *expect* exactly this to happen in such a scenario. The critical point here is that, if the system is arranged in such a manner that subordinate commanders can interpret and make decisions about different orders, they will *always* select the interpretation that aligns with personal preference and falls within their conception of their own (or their unit's) interests. In the military, those interests will largely be enhancing or protecting status and reputation, depending on the specific case.

¹⁰⁷ For examples, see Freedman, *Command*, 461–90. Although in one sense this represents standard and normal “bureaucratic knife fighting,” in another sense it proves the basic thesis of this book. Indeed, if military decisions were rationally decided and transmitted down the chain of command, this sort of occurrence would never happen. In the author's personal experience, this is a normal and expected occurrence at any military command where different chains of command can be used against one another to support the lower echelon command's perceived self-interest.

Chapter 8

The Tactical Echelon

Self-interested to the Bottom

He knew he must not expose the squadron to fire while in retreat. The men would begin to quicken their horses' pace in that event—the walk would become a trot, the trot a gallop, and his professional reputation would be blasted.

– C. S. Forester¹

The government are very keen on amassing statistics. They collect them, raise them to the nth power, take the cube root and prepare wonderful diagrams. But you must never forget that every one of these figures comes in the first instance from the village watchman, who just puts down what he damn pleases.

– Sir Josiah Stamp²

This chapter will largely eschew the approach of the previous two chapters. Although it includes individual examples, the sheer number of people who have served at the tactical level during the past century would make a project to build a coherent narrative by purely highlighting examples overwhelming. Instead of focusing on individuals as discrete anchors, this chapter instead uses their experiences to illustrate a narrative built around research; more the approach of the earlier chapters than the beginning of part 2. Ultimately, this is a book about an average distribution of behavior. There will be outliers and counterexamples in any of the levels of war discussed, and the tactical level will have the most due to the number of individuals who have served there.

¹ C. S. Forester, *The General* (London: HarperCollins UK, 1936), 10.

² Sir Josiah Charles Stamp, *Some Economic Factors in Modern Life* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1929), 258.

The point this chapter makes aligns with the rest of the book: it is not that servicemembers cannot counteract their evolutionary hard wiring and the systemic incentives they deal with every day—they often do—instead, the point is that the general propensity of the system combined with the nature of humans pushes individuals in the military to lean toward status and reputation maximizing. The easy route is one that most people will choose.

Although existential conflicts like the World Wars should seemingly be hard places to find examples of framing at the strategic and operational levels of war—although as seen in the previous chapters, they are not in reality—the entire tactical level represents a different hard case. The tactical level, where individuals are literally trying to kill other individuals, is where the risk of death or serious injury in war becomes high. Indeed, it might seem uniquely difficult to reconcile the idea of self-interested behavior and fighting in war. How might we understand the actions of individuals who put themselves in danger of losing their own lives to be self-interested? Is this not an inherently selfless act? Only partly. There are many reasons individuals join the U.S. military in the all-volunteer era, although much of the general public tends to “continue to subscribe to an idealized image of service members as moved by self-sacrificing patriotism.”³ Empirical research shows that this is an inaccurate picture, however, and instead servicemembers join the military for a complex mixture of reasons. Although *patriotism* and *duty* are often cited by military survey respondents, some of the more persistent themes for why they serve have very little to do with self-sacrifice; instead, they show the importance of remuneration, educational benefits, “they lack[ed] better options,” and perhaps most importantly for the theory presented here, *non-material* benefits, or status, reputation, standing, and prestige, among others.⁴

Primary Group Motivation

Once a servicemember is a part of the military, motivations for risking life or

³ Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston, “Patriotism or Paychecks: Who Believes What about Why Soldiers Serve,” *Armed Forces & Society* 48, no. 1 (January 2022): 25–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X20917166>. This will focus on dynamics around the U.S. military, although the author posits that many of these same dynamics seen in other Western, volunteer forces.

⁴ Krebs and Ralston, “Patriotism or Paychecks: Who Believes What about Why Soldiers Serve”; and Brian McAllister Linn, “A Historical Perspective on Today’s Recruiting Crisis,” *Parameters* 53, no. 3 (August 2023): 15, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3239>.

limb become even more interesting.⁵ There are any number of reasons why we might expect individuals at the tactical level to agree to such a thing. First, the statistical likelihood of death or injury remains relatively low, even during wartime.⁶ Second, even when individuals at the tactical level consider the possibility of death or injury, they are likely to consider the perceived odds against other self-interested considerations. This applies across history, and in many ways status and reputation are critical concepts for understanding it. Why are individuals in the military willing to risk their lives? Often, the answer is to gain status or protect their personal reputations.

James Q. Wilson, one of the most perceptive students of bureaucracy, writes that “those who argue that the behavior of an organization is nothing more than the sum of the behaviors of its rationally self-interested members cannot account for an army at war.”⁷ He goes on, however, to explain exactly how the aggregation of self-interested behaviors does exactly that. There are very good reasons that, contrary to Wilson’s claim, we might see an army’s actions exactly as the aggregate of individual self-interested behaviors. Human nature is the ultimate optimist and the ultimate pessimist.

Although most humans are generally inept at understanding probabilities, it is nonetheless a truism that individuals continue to fight during heavy combat in two ways.⁸ First, they assume they will not be the one to die. As Historian Peter S. Kindsvatter described, “Despite the death and destruction about them, many battlewise soldiers refused to consider the possibility of in-

⁵ For an extended discussion of reasons for fighting in World War I, see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 339–66.

⁶ Hannah Fischer and Hibbah Kaileh, *Trends in Active-Duty Military Deaths From 2006 through 2021* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022). Although these statistics represent modern deaths, the statistical likelihood of death in much larger conflicts was also quite low. For example, in World War II, the U.S. military had a wartime strength of approximately 12 million, with approximately 416,000 killed. Although there are stark differences by occupational specialty, rank, and area of service, these will not be addressed here. There are also significant differences that result from developments in modern medicine and varied national or Service concepts for employing troops. These, too, are omitted for the sake of brevity. For World War II numbers, see “Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers,” National WWII Museum, accessed 3 January 2025.

⁷ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 45.

⁸ For human understanding of probabilities, see Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (1979): 263–91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>. As discussed in chapter 4, this article was largely responsible for creating an entire field of study around the way humans understand and decide in probabilistic situations.

jury. In short, they believed that “it can’t happen to me.”⁹ A veteran of a much later, and far different conflict, Russian soldier Arkady Babchenko wrote of his experience in the Chechen Wars (1994–2009), “In order to be a good soldier you can have no fear of death.”¹⁰ Second, many get through heavy fighting because they assume they were likely guaranteed to be killed, and thus had no reason to prioritize protecting themselves, or what former World War II eastern front German soldier Guy Sajer described as “an attitude of morbid fatalism.”¹¹ Either of these rationalizations allows the individual to deprioritize self-preservation and instead focus on other motivations. We will return to examples of servicemembers who consider only self-preservation shortly. In the case of most, however, the other motivations on which they focus align perfectly with this framing.

When individuals at war do not prioritize self-preservation, why do they fight? What might make them put the welfare of their unit, other soldiers, or an idea above their life? There are many theories, ranging from the legitimacy of government and cause, to the idea that defense of and status within “primary groups” is the best motivator.¹² Ultimately, these ideas have some validity, but small group cohesion, or the bonds within primary groups is generally recognized as critical within professional militaries.¹³ There are counterexamples, where cohesion is not prioritized, that we will discuss later in the chapter; however, cohesive primary groups encourage two pathways that are germane to the discussion in this book.

Humans participating in organized violence almost always fight as part of a group, whether a small tribe of hunter-gatherers, a team of gang members,

⁹ Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 78–80. The author has personally discussed this with a Marine veteran of the World War II assault on Peleliu. As he described, “You just had to believe you weren’t going to be the one who got it.” Conversation with the author, 2012.

¹⁰ Arkady Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, trans. Nick Allen (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 384.

¹¹ Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2001), 363–64.

¹² After World War II and the Vietnam War, social scientists researched this question extensively. There are multiple ideas in this regard, and all of them are likely correct to some degree. The treatment here accepts the primary group theory of why soldiers fight to be the most accurate. Charles C. Moskos Jr., *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today’s Military* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), 134–35; and Robert B. Smith, “Why Soldiers Fight, Part II, Alternative Theories,” *Quality and Quantity* 18, no. 1 (December 1983): 33–58, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00221450>.

¹³ William Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2002).

or an infantry squad. This group dynamic does two things. First, individuals identify with their small group, and when fighting against other small groups they seek dominance over the other group and often within their own as well.¹⁴ This is an obvious use of the dominance pathway for status attainment. Second, beyond the dominance pathway, they fight to maintain their reputation and status within the group. Even if a member of a group does not seek to dominate it, they will nonetheless seek to accrue status and reputation as a member of it.

For example, a junior infantry squad member is generally unlikely to accrue formal dominance as the leader of their unit, but they may gain status and reputation as someone who can and should be trusted and relied on. Peter Kindsvatter shows how important it was for individual soldiers in different wars to be seen as competent by their peers, describing how “to gain the group’s respect and support, the soldier strove to succeed in combat within the standards of performance set by the group.”¹⁵ He further quotes Private First Class Stanley C. Goff, a Vietnam War machine gunner who took significant pride in his skill with the machine gun despite knowing that it was a more dangerous duty: “I mean, they [his squad] had respect for me as an individual that could really handle the pig [machine gun].”¹⁶ Wilson writes that “what does matter are the rewards a soldier receives from other soldiers.” He goes on to describe the loss of reputation—disapproval and reproach—that redounds to soldiers who do not fight as expected.¹⁷

Historian Jörn Leonhard shows that even in the cataclysmic battles on the World War I western front, the critical variable was status. He writes that “no one wanted to be thought of as a coward or traitor—a fact that remained important even under the extreme conditions of the frontline battlefield.”¹⁸ Indian soldiers in the war showed similar drive, prioritizing *izzat* (honor, standing, reputation, or prestige) over other motivations. Interestingly, *izzat* is perfectly representative of both sides of the status and reputation coin. As historian David Omissi outlined in his collection of Indian letters from the Great War, “The quest for *izzat* was driven by negative as well as positive im-

¹⁴ Will Storr, *The Status Game: On Social Position and How We Use It* (London: HarperCollins, 2021), 78–79.

¹⁵ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 124.

¹⁶ Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 101.

¹⁷ Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 46.

¹⁸ Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 2018), 495.

pulses.” Indian soldiers feared shame at least as much as, and perhaps more than, they sought honor and glory.¹⁹ This dynamic was equally common (perhaps particularly common) in one of the worst battle environments in history of warfare—the eastern front of World War II. As Stephen Fritz describes, “The lure of camaraderie overrode even their fear of death; indeed the dread of appearing weak and earning the scorn of their comrades led some to heroic deeds of valor—and to death.”²⁰ Finally, Wilson suggests that the officers and other leaders who have historically supervised small formations of troops in combat fought for slightly different personal reasons that were nonetheless also directly related to status. The most common attribution for why officers have historically risked life and limb is a more vague concept of honor that prized social “appropriateness” and preventing shame over all. However, as discussed in chapter 6, this concept too fits well within the rubric for status and reputation.²¹

There are many cases of individual leaders at the tactical level who took incredible risks for themselves and by extension the formations they led to accrue status and protect reputation. Rear Admiral Sir Robert K. Arbuthnot’s conduct during the Battle of Jutland is an excellent example (see chapter 1). After leading a naval engagement known as the “Scarborough Raid” in 1914, he was excoriated by the press and castigated by senior officers and peers alike for his meek performance. Having been publicly humiliated for an apparent lack of aggression and caution in this battle, he was unlikely to make the same mistake twice. Indeed, humiliation and a sudden, public loss of status is considered a pathway to catastrophic effects on the human psyche.²² In this case, that appears to be accurate. Seeking to redeem his reputation at Jutland, Arbuthnot went “berserk,” and “jeopardized the tactical situation of the entire fleet” by attacking the German fleet with reckless abandon. He would not be considered meek a second time.²³

¹⁹ David Omissi, ed., *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers’ Letters, 1914–18* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-27283-9>.

²⁰ Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 171.

²¹ Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 46; and Paul Bloom, *Psych: The Story of the Human Mind* (New York: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2023), 250.

²² Walter J. Torres and Raymond M. Bergner, “Humiliation: Its Nature and Consequences,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 38, no. 2 (June 2010): 195–204.

²³ Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea* (New York: Random House, 2003), 955–57.

Some contemporary observers disagree with this narrative in part, claiming Arbuthnot had no choice, as observer Commander R. Grenfell wrote after the battle, “What else could Sir Robert have done? He might have retired on the Grand Fleet [guarded his and his sailors’ lives], *but this was clearly inconceivable and we need not discuss it.*”²⁴ Grenfell, a contemporary officer of Arbuthnot’s in the British Royal Navy, understood the role of honor here—one simply *could not* retreat in the face of the enemy. It was not even worth contemplating. Whether because he had been previously humiliated or the honorable behavior of an officer in the Royal Navy prevented him from choosing the wiser course of action (both fit well with the theory of status and reputation), the end result was the same. Ultimately, he and more than 900 sailors aboard his flagship, the HMS *Defence* (1907), perished due to his rash action to redeem or protect his personal reputation.²⁵

Individual Motivation

There are other, more obvious, status indicators that military members often seek at the risk of life and limb. Indeed, Napoléon Bonaparte is reported to have said, “A man will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon.”²⁶ This is absolutely correct. Tales abound of commanders risking their troops, or troops risking their own lives, for such visible status indicators. During the post-9/11 wars, individuals and units were regularly known to seek out contact with enemy forces, not because they were tasked to do so but because the members of the formation had yet to be awarded the combat action badge, combat infantry badge, or Navy and Marine Corps Combat Action Ribbon.²⁷ A common dynamic in all modern American wars, this was no different during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, and it applied to all ranks. An officer quoted in Mara Karlin’s *The Inheritance* claimed that “every now and then you get a general who wants to sit with us while we do route clear-

²⁴ R. Grenfell, “Sir Robert Arbuthnot at Jutland,” *Royal United Services Institution Journal* 80, no. 520 (November 1935): 800–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071843509420925>. Emphasis added.

²⁵ Massie, *Castles of Steel*, 955–57.

²⁶ Allegedly in conversation with RAdm Sir Frederick Lewis Maitland, captain of HMS *Bellerophon* (1786). Napoléon was first captured and imprisoned aboard the *Bellerophon* in 1815. He was subsequently sent into exile on Saint Helena by the HMS *Northumberland* (1798).

²⁷ Author’s personal experience; and discussion with multiple officers and enlisted members in the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force. For this phenomenon in earlier wars, see Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 247.

ance so they can get a combat ribbon . . . that was painful . . . they said they can't go home without that ribbon."²⁸

Risking life and limb for visible status indicators that do not affect formal status (rank) within the organization might seem crazy to those outside the military, but anyone who has spent time within it will surely recognize this dynamic. Napoléon certainly did. Members of militaries seek to maximize their personal status, and a signifier of combat participation or heroism is an excellent way to do it. This dynamic is not unique to combat however. Even when there are no opportunities for wartime heroism, military members actively seek out ribbons, badges, and other unique status symbols. These often come at great personal cost, whether through time, effort, extreme discomfort (e.g., U.S. Army or Navy SERE [survival, evasion, resistance, and escape] or Ranger schools), or even legitimate physical danger such as jump or dive school.²⁹ Many servicemembers seek out opportunities to wear a new ribbon or badge; it is not unusual for units or individuals to attempt to change deployment locations, schedules, or timing to ensure the receipt of a new ribbon to wear.³⁰

Although the visible status symbols described above have generally been much sought after for most recent military history, what happens when the status symbols the institution provides no longer offer individuals the status they want? What if the individual or group come to see their self-interest in ways that do not comport with the normal military dynamics of status-seeking and reputation protection, whether that means rewards such as ribbons or formal status such as future promotion? Or, consider also, what happens when military members no longer care what their peers, leaders, or subordinates think of them, and they no longer prize the formal or informal status the military might confer to them? There are examples of this and, as one might expect, once individuals or groups within the military stop caring

²⁸ For all American wars, see Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 252–53; and for Iraq and Afghanistan, see Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 158.

²⁹ Physical injury rates for military schools that involve such dangerous activities are quite high. For example, see Veronique D. Hauschild et al., *Injuries Among Military Paratroopers—Current Evidence and Data Gaps* (Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD: U.S. Army Public Health Center, 2019).

³⁰ For example, Marine units stationed in Okinawa are known to regularly plan training in the Republic of Korea that lasts exactly 30 days. Why 30 days? That is the requirement for issuance of the Korean Defense Service Medal. For example, see *MARADMIN 120/04, Korean Defense Service Medal* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, March 2004).

about the formal status symbols found within the organization, they focus elsewhere. Generally speaking, this manifests in two places. First, they focus on personal or group self-interest, or in this case, self-preservation. Arkady Babchenko described this dynamic as endemic in the population of former criminals who comprised much of the Russian Army during the Chechen Wars. His description of their reason for service was to stay out of jail, not for ideology or even to do well within the military, and thus they were expected only to “save [their] own skin.”³¹

Second, when groups no longer identify with or seek the approval of one organization or group, they tend to develop their own status symbols, rituals, and expectations, just as human evolutionary biology would suggest. James Wilson explains that “when an organization that exposes its members to mortal dangers does a poor job of managing small group cohesion, those groups will start to define tasks independently of the organization.”³² This is exactly what happened during the Vietnam War, when the U.S. Army (and the Marines to a lesser degree) saw multiple informal status hierarchies emerge, *fraggings*, where troops attempted to kill or maim their leadership, and individuals or entire units refusing to participate in combat operations.³³ Even on the low end of this scale, it was common for unit decisions to be shaped by members of the unit who no longer believed in the legitimacy (or recognized the status) of their leadership; unlike the top-down model military decision-making theories would suggest, troops and their leaders in Vietnam were often said to be “working it out,” a euphemism that “signified that troops no longer automatically obeyed orders, but instead actively participated in deciding what the unit would do.”³⁴ Much like the description of the French Army in 1915 (chapter 5), the actions that actually occurred on

³¹ Babchenko, *One Soldier's War*, 384.

³² Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 47.

³³ For an in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of *combat avoidance* in American conflicts of the twentieth century, see Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 148–54; and Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 47. For the best-known instance of refusal to obey orders in Vietnam, see “50 G.I.'s in Vietnam Refuse Patrol Duty, then Agree to Go,” *New York Times*, 13 April 1972. For a discussion of fragging, see James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 313. For a complete accounting of the fragging phenomenon, see George Lepre, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011). Although there is a dearth of fully documented evidence, Lepre assess approximately 1,000 fraggings during the Vietnam War. He does not include deliberate shootings or other similar behavior.

³⁴ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 314.

the battlefield were far more shaped by individuals at the unit level than any discussion of strategy, operations, or standard account of military decision making would allow.

These dynamics were not unique to the Vietnam War, although many in the U.S. military might prefer to think so.³⁵ The most famous instance in the twentieth century of soldiers “reframing” their personal self-interest is again found in the World War I French First Army. After the apocalyptic battles at Verdun and the Somme in 1916, the new French Army commander in chief, General Robert Nivelle, planned a series of offensives at Chemin des Dames that attacked directly into the teeth of the Germans’ prepared defenses on the newly occupied Hindenburg Line. As one would expect, frontal attacks into well-prepared defensive lines resulted in even more disastrous casualties. At this point, after hundreds of thousands of dead and millions of casualties during the previous three years, much of the French Army went a step beyond the principal-agent interpretation of 1915 and instead largely refused to take place in any further offensive action.³⁶ Although they were willing to continue to defend their homeland, self-preservation eclipsed honor and unit interests subsumed status and reputation dynamics. The French Army would only agree to follow a leader who retained immense formal and informal status and reputation—Henri-Philippe Pétain.³⁷ More importantly perhaps, is that Pétain had a reputation for protecting his soldiers’ lives and took deliberate steps to restore the French Army’s confidence in its leaders, listening to many of the demands of the mutineers, improving conditions at the front lines, and providing greater rest periods for those involved directly in the fighting.³⁸

³⁵ Many in the U.S. military like to think of problems as resulting from the unique mistakes made during that war; this allows them to ignore these problems in modern day contexts. Unfortunately, this dynamic and others are found in many wars and are not a result of Vietnam, although the mistakes made there surely exacerbated them.

³⁶ For a description of the mutinies from one of the participants, see Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914–1918*, trans. Edward M. Strauss (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 325–28.

³⁷ Pétain’s heroism and frugality with lives at the Battle of Verdun gained him significant personal status and reputation that made him one of, if not the only, viable option for replacing Nivelle when the 1917 offensive failed so catastrophically.

³⁸ Bentley B. Gilbert and Paul P. Bernard, “The French Army Mutinies of 1917,” *Historian (Kingston)* 22, no. 1 (1959): 24–41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1959.tb01641.x>. It is notable that many armies of the past assumed the most effective way of preventing this behavior was to make the risk of mutiny or disobeying orders more egregious than the risk of combat. This manifested in the brutal discipline of the Duke of Wellington’s armies, Soviet penal battalions, and executions for disobedience during World War I, among many others.

As an interesting aside that fits well with the operational decision makers described in the previous chapter, status dynamics were largely responsible for the catastrophic nature of the attack. Nivelle ascended to command the army after his profligate expenditure of lives at Verdun, where he also had “become adept at creating memorable phrases” and became a national media hero.³⁹ His fluent English and smooth presentation made him popular with both French and British audiences, and there were high expectations for what Nivelle called “the formula” (his narrow-front attacks at Chemin des Dames). Unfortunately, the British and French governments expended a great deal of effort propagandizing his coming attacks, thus increasing his status as the general who had “cracked the code.” Although the attacks were an obvious failure, Nivelle refused to call them off as he had previously promised. He also refused to step down as commander in chief, and the status his political leaders had sought to grant him before the attacks made it nearly impossible for them to force him out without significant consequences to their own reputations and status. After the failure of the attacks, Nivelle did exactly as we would expect and sought to save his reputation by placing the blame on his subordinate generals, Charles Mangin and Joseph A. Micheler.⁴⁰ Eventually, the only acceptable solution was to find a general with equal (or greater) status to replace him—Pétain.⁴¹

Explicit refusal to fight like the French Army in 1917 is and was somewhat rare; however, even in extreme environments like the western front, it is notable, however, that when it did happen, it was a large portion of the entire army that refused to attack. Two historians assessed the number of mutinous units as *50 divisions*. What materialized far more regularly was a series of “tacit truces” between opposing sides, the most famous of which was the Christmas truce of 1914. These often continued for weeks, and historians have documented them not only on the western front, but also on the “Eastern, Italian, and Balkan Fronts.”⁴² Some considered these tacit truces to be purely mutinous, but in the framing here they are better illustrated as a relatively

³⁹ Keith Grint, *Mutiny and Leadership* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 127, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192893345.001.0001>.

⁴⁰ Charles Williams, *Pétain: How the Hero of France Became a Convicted Traitor and Changed the Course of History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 80.

⁴¹ Grint, *Mutiny and Leadership*, 128–30.

⁴² David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 171.

extreme example of the principal-agent problem.⁴³ Small units interpreted their leadership's direction in ways that benefited what they perceived to be their self-interest, aligning perfectly with the sort of agency and supervision problems that exist at all times throughout the ranks.

This type of reframing by small units of what goals will provide unit status and accordingly where individual loyalties belong has occurred consistently throughout history. John Keegan describes its occurrence in depth at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 in *The Face of Battle*, and it has been documented in essentially all modern conflicts among conscripts and military professionals.⁴⁴ It is thus unsurprising that we should see it in more recent wars of the modern era as well. Many special operations units have been accused of this type of reframing. It was common during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in Russian actions in Chechnya during the 1990s, and although in-depth reporting is limited it appears that the ongoing (at the time of this writing) Russian effort in Eastern Ukraine has had many similar problems between and within units.⁴⁵ The U.S. volunteer and professional military has not been immune to these problems; although outright refusals to fight have been rare during the last 20 years, there have been a number of occasions where servicemembers have exploited administrative loopholes to exit service

⁴³ Grint, *Mutiny and Leadership*, 98–110.

⁴⁴ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 180–83.

⁴⁵ For an in-depth discussion of SOF units that prioritize informal status and identify with their community far more than their leaders or Service, see David Philipps, *Alpha: Eddie Gallagher and the War for the Soul of the Navy SEALs* (New York: Crown, 2021); and “Afghanistan Inquiry: The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry,” Defence, Australian Government, 19 November 2020. For a discussion of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan, see Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–89* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 225–31. For Chechnya, see Marcus Warren, “Murder Exposes Loss of Russian Army Discipline: Generals Were Held at Gunpoint by Colonel Accused of Killing Girl, Reports Marcus Warren in Moscow,” *Daily Telegraph*, 24 February 2001. For examples of early reporting on this phenomenon among Russian soldiers in Ukraine, see Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson, and Johan Norberg, “A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War,” *Survival* 64, no. 3 (May 2022): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2078044>; Frederick W. Kagan et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 9,” Institute for the Study of War, 9 April 2022; and Stavros Atlamazoglou, “Putin’s Forces in Ukraine Sometimes Refuse to Fight,” *19FortyFive* (blog), 20 December 2022.

prior to deploying to combat.⁴⁶ The large number of troops who refused direct orders to get the COVID-19 vaccine in 2021 and 2022 might also be interpreted in a similar light, as servicemembers stopped seeking status within the Service and instead acted in what they believed to be their self-interest, consequences be damned.⁴⁷

Individual Status-Seeking

Self-preservation notwithstanding, however, it is far more common to see individuals at the tactical level seeking and cultivating status symbols much like those at the operational and strategic levels. There are any number of examples to highlight exactly the same dynamics. Many lower-ranking flag officers have been reprimanded for employing status symbols their rank did not merit in recent years. The Marine Corps in particular saw an increase in such events in the early 2010s, where several general officers used their subordinate officers as aides-de-camp even though they were not authorized to do so, and their rank was insufficient to require the services of an aide. The critical part of at least one of the investigations was less that the general officer in question used an aide, but instead that the officer designated as the aide was also directed to wear the accoutrements signifying the position (golden braided rope affixed to the uniform) as a visual status indicator among flag officers.⁴⁸ Officers and senior enlisted members abusing their rank and attempting to use indicators of rank that are not authorized will not come as a surprise to those who have spent time in the lower ranks, but this is not unique to those in senior ranks. Indeed, any company-size unit in the military will likely have seen an extensive and intense competition for which members of the staff will receive their own personal parking spots. Is this trivial? Absolutely. Is it also to be expected based on the theory presented here? Also, yes.

Other status-seeking dynamics might be seen in the extraordinary num-

⁴⁶ In the author's experience, this is relatively uncommon but certainly not unheard of. For discussion of soldiers seeking to avoid fighting in earlier conflicts, see Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 174–75.

⁴⁷ The author does not intend to argue for or against the COVID-19 vaccine mandate here other than to suggest that some servicemembers interpreted it in a way similar to direct orders for self-sacrifice in combat. For more on this topic, see Melissa Hernandez, “How Politicized Has Vaccination Become?: Thousands of U.S. Troops Are Disobeying Orders that They Get Shots,” *Los Angeles (CA) Times*, 5 January 2022; and “Department of the Army to Initiate Separation of COVID-19 Vaccination Order Refusers,” *Army.mil*, 2 February 2022.

⁴⁸ Hope Hodge Seck, “Two Marine Generals Found to Have Abused Their Authority,” *Marine Corps Times*, 10 August 2015.

ber of stolen valor cases the military prosecutes. In previous paragraphs, we saw a type of status-seeking behavior common on the battlefield, where individuals will risk life and limb for visual status signifiers like medals. It is also not uncommon for servicemembers of all ranks to risk their career and reputation by wearing or misrepresenting such status signifiers when they were not actually earned. This occurs at all echelons in the chain of command, from the famous example of Chief of Naval Operations admiral Jeremy M. Boorda, to senior enlisted personnel, to the most junior seaman. For many in the military, status takes precedence over almost any possible ramification, and many are willing to risk much for it. It is notable that Boorda's case also demonstrates the catastrophic implications of humiliation or a sudden loss of reputation, as his stolen valor case had a tragic ending. He "shot and killed himself in 1996 amid questioning of the legitimacy of two 'V' devices for valor that he wore for his service during the Vietnam War."⁴⁹ In Boorda's case specifically, it is notable that he legitimately believed he could wear the "V" devices because of a senior leader's comments years prior. He clearly did not, however, go out of his way to research the administrative correctness of this act; he was happy to wear the status signifier until publicly humiliated by it in the worst way.

Community and unit status competition is also quite common at the tactical level. There are many ways this might manifest: individuals seeking status on behalf of their unit, personality conflicts, and competition between personnel all the way throughout the chain of command.⁵⁰ Jim

⁴⁹ Ashley Rowland, "Stolen Valor Can Also Be a Problem among Active-Duty Troops," *Stars and Stripes*, 5 July 2015; Dianna Cahn, "Norfolk Sailor Guilty of Wearing Unearned Medals," *Virginian-Pilot*, 12 March 2015; and "Admiral Jeremy M. Boorda," Naval History and Heritage Command, 13 December 2017. For an in-depth history of the phenomenon of stolen valor and regulations surrounding it, see Ramya Kasturi, "Stolen Valor: A Historical Perspective on the Regulation of Military Uniform and Decorations," *Yale Journal on Regulation* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 419–48.

⁵⁰ The author experienced conflict with a status-protecting combat engineer sergeant in 2005 while deployed to Iraq. The platoon was hunting buried weapons caches. First, it removed weapons from insurgent hands. Second, it was good for the unit and its members' personal status. At the time, there was a dearth of available metal detectors, and they required specially trained personnel to operate. When the author had their family send them commercial metal detectors to mitigate this gap, it started a significant conflict with the battalion's combat engineers, who believed that only they should be authorized to use them. The combat engineers believed it was critically important to protect the status of the engineer community and to retain their unique qualifications. Less than a decade later in Afghanistan, *every* infantry patrol walked with a metal detector at the point to reduce the of improvised explosive devices.

Storr discusses these dynamics in tactical formations protecting their role in Afghanistan. He suggests that many special operations raids in Afghanistan might have been unit-level status-seeking instead of the absolute necessity many special operations commanders would otherwise claim. As he describes, Coalition special forces in Afghanistan claimed to have killed or captured 285 Taliban leaders and 12,000 insurgent fighters from 2010 to 2011. Storr suggests that instead of necessary raids, it is possible, likely even, that “the special forces community raided to justify its role, and hence size and budget.”⁵¹ This aligns with the incentives for individuals to seek out opportunities to take part in such missions, where status recognition is often given those who execute a large number of missions or claim to have a large number of “confirmed kills.”⁵² Many raids and other similar actions in Afghanistan might have been for organizational and individual status rather than military necessity.

Raids to support status-seeking behavior are by now well known within and outside the military community. Several of the most notable military books from the early 2000s and 2010s were written by Navy SEALs and other special operations personnel. Many of these individuals sought to parlay their military experience into success and status in other domains and often they succeeded. Whether former high-ranking officers like Admiral William H. McRaven (University of Texas chancellor from 2015 to 2018), mid-grade officers like Lieutenant Commander John G. Willink (author and podcaster), or enlisted SEALs and other special operations personnel who have gained fame and fortune from their experiences (real or embellished), in many ways the right kind of military service has become a way

⁵¹ Jim Storr, *Something Rotten: Land Command in the 21st Century* (Aldershot, UK: Howgate Publishing, 2022), 43.

⁵² The U.S. military does not officially track any metrics associated with confirmed kills. Nonetheless, it is a common claim by those who seek status recognition. The most famous modern example can be found in Chris Kyle, Scott McEwen, and Jim DeFelice, *American Sniper: Memorial Edition* (New York: HarperLuxe, 2013).

to maximize status beyond the narrow sphere of the military hierarchy.⁵³

Finally, some evidence shows that military culture—either deliberately or inadvertently—understands these individual status dynamics and seeks to manage them. When this management breaks down, there might be a resultant crisis, such as the extreme mutinous behavior described earlier or what was seen with the U.S. Army after My Lai. Indeed, the Army’s *Study on Military Professionalism*, completed in the wake of the incident—and promptly declared close hold by General Westmoreland in a classic reputation-protecting move—identified an existing climate that “includes persistent and rather ubiquitous overtones of: selfish behavior that places personal success ahead of the good of the service,” along with focusing on pleasing superiors, preoccupation with “trivial short-term objectives even through dishonest practices,” and several other organizational dynamics that fit the framing of this book.⁵⁴ Although reluctant, the Service nonetheless recognized that it had a problem that it sought to remedy.

One of the ways militaries manage this problem can be by deliberately shaping the outcomes that servicemembers seek and ascribe greater status to. As Morris Janowitz describes, prestige patterns—and thus the acts military members prioritize—change as individuals attain various levels of formal status (rank). For example, being considered the best airplane pilot is a significant status marker for junior officer pilots but it ceases to have the same cachet as officers move up the ranks and is then displaced by decision making and planning acumen. Janowitz goes on to explain how professional military education (PME) is explicitly designed to help individuals change their understanding of prestige patterns and reframe the specific types of prestige they

⁵³ For just a few of the most famous examples of this dynamic, see William H. McRaven, *Sea Stories: My Life in Special Operations* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019); Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017); Kyle, McEwen, and DeFelice, *American Sniper*; Mark Owen and Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy Seal: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Dutton Books, 2012); Marcus Luttrell and Patrick Robinson, *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009); Robert O’Neill, *The Operator: Firing the Shots that Killed Osama Bin Laden and My Years as a SEAL Team Warrior* (New York: Scribner, 2017); and Nicholas Irving and Gary Brozek, *The Reaper: Autobiography of One of the Deadliest Special Ops Snipers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1970), 13.

seek.⁵⁵ However, it is interesting to note that in the modern era there are pathways for individuals to ascend the ranks without attending any or all formal PME. This suggests that some senior leaders may retain their earlier ideas of prestige patterns and focus in areas that are unhelpful at best and detrimental at worst as seen on previous pages.

Special Case: The Bureaucracy

As noted in previous chapters, the structure, nature, and culture of the military bureaucracy incentivizes self-interested status-seeking more than most nonmilitary government agencies or private organizations. The ways to maximize personal or organizational utility within the hierarchy are denied to ambitious military personnel by law; thus, they seek to maximize status while managing and protecting their reputations. As in previous sections, this manifests at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Although the bureaucracy is a common thread that connects all of these, there will be a brief separate treatment here. There are examples of status-seeking within and as a part of the bureaucracy that have effects on all levels of war in which the military operates. The different echelons are somewhat unique circumstances where we can show examples of self-interest and status-seeking behavior; the bureaucracy, conversely, shapes the cultural milieu within which all of these examples exist.

The first example is the tendency of military members to identify with, rationalize the need for, and seek to justify the existence of almost any staff echelon or staff sections within most units. It is axiomatic that military staffs will grow unless deliberately reduced.⁵⁶ This is far from a purely historical problem; as Air Force lieutenant general David A. Deptula recently testified to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, “Defense Agencies have exploded since that time frame [1947], as has the bureaucracies of the service secretariats; the Office of the Secretary of Defense staff; and the joint staff, as

⁵⁵ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 73.

⁵⁶ Field Marshal William Slim, “Higher Command in War,” *Military Review* (May–June 2020). A former chief of the Imperial General Staff, Slim argued that the only way to control staff size was to deliberately cut personnel on a set schedule. He proposed three ways to do it; he also made the case that if this is not done, staffs will continue to rationalize reasons to grow and expand their purview.

well as the oversight of the Department of Defense (DOD) by Congress.”⁵⁷ Despite continual efforts to reduce this bureaucratic overhead since the late 1960s, however, very few of these attempts have borne fruit.⁵⁸ Much of this is due to the fact that most members of military bureaucracies identify with the importance and status of their job. General Sir Arthur Harris recalls that when he first showed up to the British Air Ministry to take charge of the strategic bombing effort in World War II, he “was greeted on arrival . . . with stacks and stacks of files . . . each arguing against the reduction of any member of the staff.” He describes how the Air Ministry “seemed to be spending the greater part of its time in justifying its own existence.”⁵⁹

The military promotion system is a second example of the bureaucracy shaping the broader environment within which all its members exist. It fits Max Weber’s ideal hierarchy almost perfectly, as there can be no “lateral entry” into it. With rare exceptions, all U.S. officers and enlisted members must work their way up the bureaucratic ladder *within* the Service, which is generally the case in other Western militaries as well. Thus, every member is socialized into this system and must play their part if they want to advance. Within the U.S. military specifically, the nature of this system is amplified by what is known as the “up or out” model, where servicemembers must rise in the hierarchy by specific time intervals or they will be forced to leave the Service. This creates perverse incentives where members of the same rank inherently compete with each other for rankings in the evaluation systems, for the jobs that are most likely to win them promotion, on military screening boards, and for many other informal status indicators.⁶⁰ Although there are those who do not compete as aggressively as others, those servicemembers are also the ones who are typically not chosen for advancement to the higher ranks. Indeed, the structure of the U.S. personnel system exists in such a way that it selects for precisely those who compete

⁵⁷ *Revisiting the Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces*, Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, 114th Cong., 2d Sess. (5 November 2015).

⁵⁸ Zachery Tyson Brown and Kathleen J. McInnis, “The Pentagon’s Office Culture Is Stuck in 1968,” *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2021.

⁵⁹ Sir Arthur Harris, *Bomber Offensive*, 2d ed. (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2005), 32.

⁶⁰ The general contours of this phenomenon are not unique to the U.S. military, although the specifics will definitely vary by each organization. For a description of how it manifests in the French Army, for example, see Christel Coton, “The Struggle for Prestige among Peers,” *Societes contemporaines* 72, no. 4 (November 2008): 15–35.

for status most aggressively; conversely, it eliminates those who do not.⁶¹

There are implications for the subordinates of each of these individuals as well. Since every echelon selects for ever more ambitious and status-seeking individuals, we should expect these leaders to require more from themselves and their staffs as well. This is likely the case in several ways. First, there is some evidence to support the idea that competence at a job is correlated with an increase in workload. This comes both from seniors in the hierarchy (i.e., managers or leaders who assign tasks) and peers (who rely heavily on the competent worker).⁶² Therefore, we should expect to see competent servicemembers—those who are also status-seeking, ambitious, and do well based on the metrics of the organization—accrue ever increasing amounts of bureaucratic work. Second, some researchers argue that “busyness” has become a status symbol in the modern world akin to Thorstein Veblen’s idea of “conspicuous consumption.”⁶³ Many who are familiar with the military may recognize this as accurate; it is common for leaders to expect email responses and phone availability at any time, work to be completed during off hours, or job requirements (e.g., physical fitness activities) to be accomplished during “free time.”⁶⁴ It is also common for members of the military bureaucracy to work extreme hours, and in many organizations that too becomes both a status marker and a “competence indicator” that helps someone accrue additional status. As researchers from Columbia Business School have shown, the phenomenon of having too much work and remaining too busy to get

⁶¹ For a discussion of this dynamic in government agencies see Gordon Tullock, *Bureaucracy*, ed. Charles K. Rowley, vol. 6 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 21–22.

⁶² Christy Zhou Koval et al., “The Burden of Responsibility: Interpersonal Costs of High Self-Control,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 5 (May 2015): 750–66, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000015>. This article does not measure competence directly; however, it measures self-control and assumes a close correlation between self-control and competence.

⁶³ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, ed. Martha Banta (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶⁴ In fact, this phenomenon is so common in the military that it was considered significant news when an Army division commander banned the act in 2024. See Steve Beynon, “Army Division Bars Leaders from Bothering Their Soldiers after Work Hours,” *Military.com*, 29 April 2024.

it done in a normal workday is interpreted by many as a status symbol.⁶⁵

Forced innovation is yet another status marker that is common within Western military bureaucracies. Due to the rapid rotation and assignment vagaries of the military personnel system, many leaders regardless of echelon feel pressure to make change as they assume the leadership of a unit. This is a common pressure at all levels, whether an infantry squad, a ballistic missile submarine, or an armored division. Professional military education across the Services strives to teach how to lead change, and private organizations focused on the military often do the same.⁶⁶ Because of this, there is status and positive reputation in being seen as “innovative,” within the military (only to a point, though, as major innovation is generally considered deviant), and commanders often latch on to certain capabilities, organizations, or concepts.⁶⁷ Far from a new phenomenon, Maureen Mylander described in the 1970s how “another way to tap into the success cycle is to become associated with some kind of ‘first’.” Military leaders who become known as someone on the leading edge of some sort of new development, particularly a technical one like the helicopter, smart weapons, or in the modern era something like

⁶⁵ Silvia Bellezza, Neeru Paharia, and Anat Keinan, “Conspicuous Consumption of Time: When Busyness and Lack of Leisure Time Become a Status Symbol,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 44, no. 1 (2017): 118–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw076>. In the United States, extra hours worked are generally attributed to a motivation for gaining status, particularly promotion or remuneration. Because the military is prevented from offering remuneration incentive, increased formal or informal status is the most likely motivation for this. See Linda A. Bell and Richard B. Freeman, “The Incentive for Working Hard: Explaining Hours Worked Differences in the U.S. and Germany,” *NBER Working Paper Series* (2000), 8051, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w8051>. Notably, this may not be a particularly modern development in the culture of the United States. Alexis de Tocqueville devoted an entire chapter of *Democracy in America* to the subject in “Why Americans seem so Restless in the Midst of their Well-Being.” See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: D. Appleton, 1899), 625.

⁶⁶ For discussion of external pressures for change see Arita Holmberg and Aida Alvinus, “How Pressure for Change Challenge Military Organizational Characteristics,” *Defence Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 130–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2019.1575698>. For an example of this effort within the military, see Tom Galvin, *Leading Change in Military Organizations: Primer for Senior Leaders* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2019). It is notable that the subject “military change/transformation” is one of the eight strategic issues the U.S. Army War College includes on its website. See “U.S. Army War College Publications,” armywarcollege.edu, accessed 6 March 2025. For an example of a private organization, see Dennis P. Reilly, “The Change Agent,” *From the Green Notebook*, 29 November 2021.

⁶⁷ For the deviant side of innovation, see Thaddeus Drake and Derrick McClain, “Deviance and Innovation: Change in a ‘Society of Saints’,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (July 2024): 24–34.

unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), are often considered to have a particular cachet within their Service or functional area.⁶⁸ James Q. Wilson explains that “government executives are particularly prone to adopt one kind of often ill-advised change—those that appear to enhance their own power. Again the military is rich with examples.”⁶⁹ In this case, power is ancillary; it comes along with the status gained by becoming known as an innovator.

As status is an inherently comparative metric (high status compared to whom?), there is also status to be gained by making someone’s predecessor look as bad as possible without appearing to be obviously denigrating them. Although this rarely appears in the form of explicit or overt attacks on the skills of a former leader or staff billet holder, framing previous efforts as failures and personal progress as success can often redound to personal benefit. This was common, and extremely pernicious, during the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where each new unit would arrive to its area of operations, assess security or some other metric to be bad (using varying definitions of the word), and work at making it good. By the end of a 7- or 13-month tour, coincidentally right before the unit was scheduled to leave, it would assess its area’s security as “good,” or most of its goals as complete. A new unit would arrive, and the cycle started all over again.⁷⁰

This cycle is equally common in daily bureaucratic military life, as units focus on looming inspections, making sure all the proper paperwork is in order (rarely concerned with actual warfighting readiness), and then moving to the next inspection as soon as one is complete.⁷¹ In a modern shadow of the bureaucratic focus on body counts discussed in the previous chapter, because success as a commander or staff officer (reputation and future status) is contingent on these cyclical inspections, there is every incentive to focus almost

⁶⁸ Maureen Mylander, *The Generals: Making It, Military-Style* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), 149–51.

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 228.

⁷⁰ Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 205. This was similarly common in Iraq, when units were responsible for training Iraqi security forces and almost always assessed their progress to make them combat ready at coincidentally the exact same date the American unit was scheduled to rotate back to the United States. See William C. Hix and Kalev I. Sepp, “Assessing Counterinsurgency: The Iraq War, 2004–5,” in *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure*, ed. Leo J. Blanken, Hy Rothstein, and Jason J. Lepore (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 208.

⁷¹ Theo Lipsky, “The Burden of Command: Checklists, Inspections, and Bureaucracy,” *Modern War Institute*, 27 December 2022.

entirely on what is measured; actual success is at best likely to be an ancillary result. As often as not, though, this dynamic generates mediocrity at best and failure at worst.⁷²

Finally, perhaps the most common of all bureaucratic reputation and status protecting mechanisms is the reflexive secrecy found in almost every echelon of the military hierarchy.⁷³ As Eric Schlosser describes in his book on Cold War nuclear accidents, *Command and Control*, “The need to protect national security has long been used as a justification for hiding things to avoid embarrassment.”⁷⁴ Schlosser further describes throughout the book multiple incidents where the U.S. government classified or restricted information about nuclear accidents where any number of civilians might have been killed. Although there are obviously good reasons for keeping some nuclear information secret, the reflexive secrecy surrounding nuclear accidents is more usefully understood as reputation protection, not preventing damage to national security.

An interesting capstone to the discussion of bureaucratic reputation protection is the landmark Supreme Court Case, *United States v. Reynolds*.⁷⁵ Brought by the widows of three U.S. Air Force personnel who were killed when a Boeing B-29 Superfortress crashed in 1948, they accused the government of negligence and sought release of the accident report. The Air Force challenged this claim, arguing the details of the accident were classified. After appeal to the Supreme Court, this case “established the framework for the government’s ‘state secrets’ privilege . . . which for decades enabled federal agencies to conceal conduct, withhold documents, and block civil litigation, all in the name of national security.”⁷⁶ However, after the declassification of

⁷² A recent study argues explicitly that public trust in the military stems not from actual competence or performance, but instead results from the public’s *perception* of performance. This aligns with the current volume’s approach, which argues that the military understands this dynamic well. It also applies within the military; trust in specific individuals or units often has very little to do with battlefield success or specific performance metrics, but instead on how well they manage inspections or metrics that may be unrelated to their battlefield task or mission. See Max Margulies and Jessica Blankshain, “Specific Sources of Trust in Generals: Individual-Level Trust in the U.S. Military,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (2022): 254–75, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01954.

⁷³ Also discussed in chapter 5.

⁷⁴ Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 466.

⁷⁵ *United States v. Reynolds*, 345 U.S. 1 (1953).

⁷⁶ Barry Siegel, *Claim of Privilege: A Mysterious Plane Crash, a Landmark Supreme Court Case, and the Rise of State Secrets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), ix.

the accident report in 2000, it became clear that not only were there no elements of the crash that should have been deemed classified information, but there was evidence of “serious negligence” on the part of the Air Force. The classification, refusal to release, and subsequent court battles in the case that created the legal precedent for state secrets in the United States were due to reflexive reputation protection on the part of the U.S. Air Force.⁷⁷

The use of secrets to accrue and retain status within hierarchies has been recognized as fundamental since Max Weber’s earliest writings. It is no different in the modern military bureaucracy. Less useful for attaining status, although access to and use of knowledge certainly can help someone advance in some circles, secrecy has become the go-to response from the military when its reputation may be compromised. This was clear during the late 1960s and early 1970s with the battle over the release of the *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force* (a.k.a. the Pentagon Papers), among many other, low-level obfuscations during the Vietnam War.⁷⁸ It was equally clear during modern wars as Daniel Whitlock ably shows in *The Afghanistan Papers*.⁷⁹ As Schlosser shows, it was, and is, also common during peacetime.

The vast majority of the time there is no obvious national security benefit to hiding information from the public; however, military bureaucracies around the world do it automatically. In some cases, like some of the accidents Schlosser describes, keeping secrets from members of the military and the public is actually *harmful* to the very people the military serves to protect. In other cases, military bureaucrats have covered up, obfuscated, or lied about events that could not be tangentially connected to national security, such as the seemingly regular recurrence of poisoned drinking water on and around military bases.⁸⁰ What possible reason might the organization have for hiding information that could be harmful to the public? Simple answer: reputation

⁷⁷ Louis Fisher, *In the Name of National Security: Unchecked Presidential Power and the Reynolds Case* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), xi.

⁷⁸ For the complete 2011 release of this document, see “Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force,” Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, 2011, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁷⁹ Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*.

⁸⁰ For several examples, see *Poisoned Patriots: Contaminated Drinking Water at Camp Lejeune*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives, 110th Cong., 1st Sess. (12 June 2007); “How a Disaster of the Navy’s Own Making Poisoned Thousands of People in Hawaii,” *Task & Purpose*, 1 July 2022; and Peter Sills, *Toxic War: The Story of Agent Orange* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

management. This is one of the most obvious and corrosive types of reputation management found within the military and is likely to have significant implications as the world's information environment becomes increasingly transparent.

Chapter 9

Implications and Counterarguments

The inescapable conclusion is that not only expectation and behavior, but the system itself must change because it too often rewards the wrong people: the wooden soldiers, glamour boys, conformists, the ones who cover their asses, value appearance over substance, and look good on paper. Worse, the system makes most of the individualists who do slip through afraid to speak out, correct injustice, reward the deserving, listen to critics, observe the Army's own code and express their better natures. Officers know best what kind of men are "making it," and the knowledge invokes despair.

~ Maureen Mylander¹

The Soldier not only wanted to be thanked for his service when he returned home, but he also craved recognition while still overseas . . . beyond personal accomplishments, the soldier wanted recognition for his unit, with which he closely identified.

~ Peter Kindsvatter²

At this point in most books of this nature, there would be a chapter or two that laid out policy recommendations and proposed changes to address the issues identified. This work does not follow that trend for three reasons. First,

¹ Maureen Mylander, *The Generals: Making It, Military-Style* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), 322.

² Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 264.

the point of the book is to reframe the conventional understanding of military decision making. In a sense, *all* of the preceding chapters are focused on recommendations. A recommendations chapter that articulates this again would be generally unhelpful. Second, this book is not intended to be either predictive or normative. At no point does it seek to articulate either the way something *will be* or *ought to be*; instead, it seeks to examine the world as it is now and has been in the relatively recent past. It describes a phenomenon in a way that previously had not been done; at its simplest, this book is an attempt to reframe military decision making by explaining and understanding behavior that seems obvious throughout military history yet has not been examined using this particular framework.

Finally, although the policy recommendations in many books are cogent, well considered, and highly intelligent, the author remains skeptical, given the framework employed here, that any recommendations presented would be effectively implemented or even attempted in any sort of coherent, strategic fashion. More importantly, perhaps, even if recommendations articulated here were implemented, they would not address the fundamental point that an understanding of military decision making must give much greater consideration to intentions, motivations, and choices made at each echelon of command. Although changes to the existing system might influence or limit the amount of status and reputation maximization that occurs, the basic point of public choice theory is that some other motivation will then rise to the top. This chapter does not intend to propose specific changes that will lead to these trade-offs; that is for those who develop the laws and policies surrounding military life. Instead, it considers the implications of several of the most important points in the book: for basic military decision making, for individuals within the military hierarchy, and for organizations that fit within the broad rubric of military Services, units, large and small, and other bureaucratic agencies that serve the overall mission of the armed forces.

There are many implications one might find in this study. The implications of public choice thinking for the general understanding of military decision making are simultaneously important and yet seemingly banal. In many ways, a discussion of military decision making that understands the way organizational action is shaped from the bottom up and describes an environment in which leaders at all levels are self-interested and seek to maximize utility may not be surprising in the least. Many readers, particularly those who were in the military and spent time subordinate to or in the vicin-

ity of particularly aggressive status-seekers (or who were themselves aggressive status-seekers) might meet the majority of this book with a collective shrug. Nonetheless, as the introduction discussed, very few military decision theories consider the possibility of the principal-agent problem, misaligned incentives throughout the chain of command, and utility maximizing activity throughout the military hierarchy. Although every theory is a battle between granularity that attempts to explain each unique human action and general correctness in aggregate, previous theories of military decision making have simplified military action to a level that misses the trees for the forest. Most of these theories are built on the edifice of military history, which gives short shrift to decisions made at lower echelons and instead often assumes as true the grand narratives produced by governments, leaders, and militaries—all of whom seek to protect and define their reputations for posterity.³

As with a 12-step program, the first step to understanding the implications of public choice framing is to recognize that there is a problem. Until and unless readers and thinkers admit that top-down, rational choice narratives of military decisions are significantly flawed, the organizational rational choice model will remain the preferred, and almost only, model. Indeed, given the extremely helpful theoretical simplification rational choice interpretations provide, we should fully expect most military thinkers to use this way of thinking as their preferred way of explaining military decisions. Humans commonly prefer coherent, easily understood stories, and are generally hard wired to create them even when they are manifestly inaccurate.⁴

Nonetheless, public choice framing offers a very useful way of explaining military action. It has obvious utility when trying to understand many otherwise inexplicable actions such as those found in the previous chapters. It also provides a model for understanding many normal military decisions that might otherwise be met with a shrug and the statement, “That’s the way we’ve

³ This does not suggest that military history has not covered individual servicemembers’ experiences in wars. It has obviously done so. Instead, the point here is that to create a coherent narrative of how and why things happened, the historian has to build a confabulatory edifice. Individual decisions and contingency are what actually make up the how and why far more than most histories would prefer to admit.

⁴ Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Mind’s Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Stephen Jay Gould and R. C. Lewontin famously attacked this tendency in evolutionary biology in their article, “The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Biological Sciences* 205, no. 1161 (1979): 581–98.

always done it.” Indeed, some of the most basic questions, such as why the bifurcation of officer and enlisted ranks exists or the original and continuing purpose or utility of uniforms and visible status signifiers, can be answered using the behavioral understanding this book seeks to provide.⁵ Why do militaries do many of the odd and seemingly unnecessary things they do? Why do leaders at all echelons make seemingly inexplicable decisions? Why do members of the hierarchy not act in accordance with the “golden thread of purpose?” Because people act in their self-interest, and in the military the things they often prize the most are status and reputation.

Thus, the implications of public choice thinking applied to the military are simultaneously unsurprising to some, uncomfortable for many, and yet also useful for understanding the military sphere. In a world where strategies were developed by teams of “great men” who provide direction and then see their orders obeyed in a cascade of smaller directions, this would not be necessary.⁶ Instead, however, we should understand military decision making as public choice theorists have come to understand all other government decision making: a complex negotiation between many stakeholders, all of whom seek to maximize their interests (i.e., status and reputation), usually by focusing on specific things they view as important. At essentially all levels, this results in shifting priorities, short-term thinking, and leadership that is primarily concerned with success during the brief period in which they remain in command.

Just as commanders in peripheral or unimportant theaters in World War II were perfectly happy, and even expected, to disregard the clear strategy of the war and aggressively strive for their and their units’ status, we should expect to see the same dynamics today. That is indeed the case. No military

⁵ Notably, the U.S. Army grappled with questions like these in the immediate aftermath of World War II. LtGen James H. Doolittle led a board that offered the *Report of the Secretary of War’s Board on Officer-Enlisted Man Relationships* (Washington, DC: War Department, 1946), that proposed a number of radical changes to officer-enlisted relationships along with other structural modifications. Although these relationships have changed over time as cultural norms have changed, there is little evidence that the U.S. military has truly sought to look beyond the existing officer-enlisted bifurcation to imagine something different. For a discussion of the Doolittle report, see Kevin P. Anastas, “Demobilization and Democratizing Discipline: The Doolittle Board and the Post World War II Response to Criticism of the United States Army” (master’s thesis, Duke University, 29 April 1983).

⁶ For a description of the “great man” theory of military planning and strategy, see Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13–14.

operational commander has any incentive to ask for fewer resources, to minimize the potential threat in the area they are responsible for, or to describe their mission as unimportant. Thus, U.S. strategy often becomes less about deliberate apportionment of scarce resources and instead an exercise in allocating resources to whichever commander or command is best at advocating for their position. Instead of deciding on an optimal strategy and decision or even choosing the most acceptable and executing throughout the chain, every echelon is subject to the arguments and status grabs made from below.⁷ As an anonymous senior official told scholar of the post-9/11 wars, Mara Karlin, “The Combatant Commands are baby birds and are always going to want more.”⁸ Of course, this does not apply only to the U.S. military’s combatant commands; everyone in the Services is a baby bird that wants more, and it is exceptionally rare for any organization to willingly give up status or budget, especially if there is rarely a positive return from it.

The short-term nature of assignments within the U.S. military (and most other Western militaries) multiplies this problem. Hence, Richard Hanania writes that “even on the most important issues, long-term planning is practically nonexistent, because leaders know that future problems will be left to their successors, or that, if they are not, they can make another political decision in the future.”⁹ This is often the case. Whether at the military strategic level or at the individual tactical level, public choice thinking does the best job of fully understanding the words of the Helmuth von Moltke that “strategy is a system of expedients. . . . [It is] the continued development of the original leading thought in accordance with the constant changing circumstances.”¹⁰ This part of Moltke’s famous quote does not necessarily put the lie to rational choice decision thinking, although it does complicate it. The remainder of the quote, however, where Moltke tells us that strategy “is the art of acting under the pressure of the most difficult conditions,” is where the

⁷ For discussion of the insatiable appetite of combatant commands, see Mackenzie Eaglen, “Putting Combatant Commanders on a Demand Signal Diet,” *War on the Rocks*, 9 November 2020.

⁸ Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military after Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 133.

⁹ Richard Hanania, *Public Choice Theory and the Illusion of American Grand Strategy: How Generals, Weapons Manufacturers, and Foreign Governments Shape American Foreign Policy* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 170.

¹⁰ Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, ed. Daniel J. Hughes, trans. Harry Bell and Daniel J. Hughes (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), 47.

framing of this book comes to fruition.¹¹ When individuals, at any rank, are required to make decisions in response to a unique circumstance, particularly under pressure—whether political pressure, like generals at the strategic end of the spectrum, or physical danger, like the tactical—they will almost always favor what meets their self-interest.¹² In the military, that self-interest is most often status accrual or reputation management. As economist Jack Hirshleifer noted, people act in accordance with well-known psychological instincts and drives, most notably in the wars of the modern era those of “honor/respect/glory/prestige.”¹³

What is the implication then? The reader who has made it this far may have a growing feeling that a sort of nihilism about military decision making is imminent. This is not the case. Although there are further implications of status and reputation dynamics that we will discuss in later paragraphs, the most important output of applying public choice thinking is simply recognizing that its framing is a useful way of understanding the decisions people and organizations make. Military decision makers are humans, and they should be treated as any other humans within the government. Sometimes they make good choices, sometimes they make bad ones, and most of the time conscious and unconscious motivations are fundamental drivers that inform the decision regardless of what it is. Motivated reasoning is not only real; it is the only kind of reasoning in the human condition.¹⁴ Even in a state of perfect isolation with literally zero outside influences, the subconscious motivations exerted by evolutionary biology are unavoidable.

The most important implication of this study then is to recognize that every decision has a multivariate set of conditions and motivations that inform it, and thus leaders at every level should ask “why” much more often of themselves and of their leaders and subordinates. Everyone who thinks about

¹¹ von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 47.

¹² As noted in chapter 1, there are many types and processes that lead to military decisions. The current study does not disambiguate this topic; however, it is clear that there is room for distinction here.

¹³ Jack Hirshleifer, “The Bioeconomic Causes of War,” *Managerial and Decision Economics* 19, no. 7/8 (1998): 457–66.

¹⁴ Antoine Bechara and Antonio R. Damasio, “The Somatic Marker Hypothesis: A Neural Theory of Economic Decision,” *Games and Economic Behavior*, Special Issue on Neuroeconomics, 52, no. 2 (August 2005): 336–72, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geb.2004.06.010>. This work suggests that not only is all reasoning motivated, but in fact any decision making that a normal person might consider rational is in fact shaped by emotions, precisely the opposite from what many might think.

military decisions should also realize that the military hierarchy, based on the idea of a perfect chain of motivations to achieve a clearly understood and decided on military outcome, is a well-developed and constructed fantasy tale. Even if the majority of decision makers did concur that top-down military decisions were in keeping with their self-interest or even disregarded their self-interest entirely, it only requires an individual somewhere in the chain to disagree and prioritize their personal utility and the entire edifice crumbles. Those who govern the military—leaders within the organization, lawmakers, appointed civilians, and even the public—should recognize this problem. The most effective remedy is to take a realistic view of human nature and build a hierarchy that uses individuals' self-interest against each other to mitigate any single actor corrupting the chain. Just as the framers of the U.S. Constitution assumed that personal and organizational interests would always be an issue and thus attempted to balance the echelons of government and other power centers with incentives that counteracted each other, so too might it be possible to try to design a system to limit or control military decisions in such a manner.

It is also important to note, however, that rationally self-interested does not have to mean selfish, self-centered, or focused on achieving at the cost of others. As discussed in chapter 4, there are many ways to accrue status, and it is common for people to use any or all of them either on their own or in combination. Members of the military, just like other humans, choose to prioritize one or more of these mechanisms over another. Indeed, there are many places or occasions within the military where “virtue” pathways will gain an actor enormous informal status. Unfortunately, the formal systems and structure of the organization do not prioritize this pathway, except in the most exceptional of circumstances.¹⁵

Economist Russ Roberts wrote convincingly about the idea of “privileging one’s principles.” This idea approaches human action from the perspective of economic rational choice, much like this book. Just as someone might rationally choose to prioritize the principle about feeling good that they returned a lost wallet to its owner without taking the money inside it, they might also

¹⁵ The vast majority of Medals of Honor awarded during the post-9/11 wars recognized such acts of virtue. There have been several Marines and soldiers who were awarded for sacrificing their life to protect their troops. Nonetheless, this is an extreme circumstance, and even if one were to include other medals for heroism that might also have been earned in similar circumstances, most of the military evaluation, promotion, and awards system does not prioritize for this type of sacrifice.

choose to help an adjacent unit or servicemember achieve something without hope of reward. Rational self-interest is normal and human, but as Roberts describes, humans are able to influence their own motivations. We are able to deliberately prioritize the things we prefer and minimize the things we see as undesirable.¹⁶ As philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt has written, “Human beings are the only animals that have desires about our desires.”¹⁷ The point here is that human self-interest is not an unchanging human characteristic and it does not mean that we naturally take every decision as a zero-sum, first-order gain or loss. Although there are basic evolutionary and cultural desires that greatly affect many of our choices and instinctual drives, we are also able to influence them. People have the ability to make choices that seemingly go against their self-interest; the valor decisions mentioned in chapter 8 and discussed further in this chapter might be examples of this, as are millions of normal daily decisions servicemembers make every day for no reason other than they are the right thing to do.

There is evidence to suggest that choosing to do something because it is the right thing to do, or “privileging one’s principles,” can actually shape future decisions. Psychological research suggests that thinking about and deliberately crafting mental reasons for why someone took an action can have important effects on subsequent actions. Even if humans confabulate or create false causal stories about all manner of things, building a story that tells ourselves that our reasons for acting were for noble causes, or to satisfy important principles, or for some other virtuous reason may have the effect of making it *more likely* that we act in that manner again.¹⁸

However, the military system is neither structured nor designed to inspire people to “privilege their principles.” As we have seen, it instead selects for, encourages, and develops a keen sense of status and reputation. In the author’s personal experience, many servicemembers are exactly the type of people most would expect to privilege their principles in deliberate decision making. The bureaucratic system of military hierarchies is not designed to

¹⁶ Russ Roberts, *Wild Problems: A Guide to the Decisions that Define Us* (New York: Portfolio, 2022), 133–56.

¹⁷ Harry Frankfurt, quoted in Roberts, *Wild Problems*, 149.

¹⁸ Eldar Shafir, Itamar Simonson, and Amos Tversky, “Reason-Based Choice,” *Cognition* 49, no. 1 (1993): 11–36, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277\(93\)90034-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277(93)90034-S); and Liane Young, Alek Chakroff, and Jessica Tom, “Doing Good Leads to More Good: The Reinforcing Power of a Moral Self-Concept,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 3 (2012): 325–34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-012-0111-6>.

encourage or reward that behavior however. It does reward status-seeking and reputation management. In chapter 1, the discussion began with the economic idea that people respond to incentives. The incentives in the military system are to seek status, manage one's reputation, and generally operate as the system prefers. Rationalization in this sort of system is the norm, and as we have seen, humans have an exceptional capacity for motivated reasoning and self-deception.¹⁹ It is essentially impossible to disentangle conscious and unconscious motivations; even when the most altruistic of humans makes a decision that appears to be based solely on virtue or a desire to help another with no probability of reward, it is entirely possible that a status-seeking behavioral pathway is at least partly involved.²⁰ Understanding this is the case, we must now explore the implications of living in a system where status competition is not just a part of regular human experience, but instead is prioritized for its members all the time.

The Implications of Status and Reputation Maximizing

The implications of a system that prioritizes status-seeking and reputation management are many. They manifest throughout military life and affect larger organizations as well as individual servicemembers in many ways. Although chapter 4 described many of the unconscious mechanisms surrounding these concepts, we will return to them to address some of the key problems that arise from the way the military encourages status maximization, both inadvertently and through deliberate design. Importantly, this chapter does not claim to cover the topic in-depth but seeks to highlight a representative sample of the ways this motivation might affect military operations and individuals within the system. We have seen many of them in the previous chapters that provide historical examples of such behavior. Much further study is necessary, however, to understand how these dynamics affect the many different facets of military life discussed here.

The most important implication of this study may be obvious to many yet has not been directly stated: the scientific and historical evidence shows that some military leaders may trade the lives of those under their command for increased status or to protect their reputation. This is neither to claim that

¹⁹ Robert Trivers, "The Elements of a Scientific Theory of Self Deception," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 907, no. 1 (2000): 114–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2000.tb06619.x>.

²⁰ As Will Storr writes, "Even the most precious of our beliefs, the ones we count as 'moral' are influenced by and part of virtue related 'status games'." See Storr, *The Status Game*, 137.

they do it knowingly or intentionally, nor it is to claim that there is not a wide array of reasons military members might advocate for one course of action or another; but nonetheless, if status-seeking is as common as this volume suggests, it is something members of the military should grapple with. Political scientists Dan Altman and Melissa M. Lee recently made the case that militaries are often behind attempts at territorial conquest *specifically* because those attempts support military officer's careers. Indeed, their argument is congruent with that presented here; efforts at territorial conquest are likely to increase military status, and so militaries have often (and perhaps usually) been responsible for starting wars of conquest since 1945.

In Altman and Lee's research, it appears this is the case even if the effort at conquest fails; they find that military officers are incentivized to seek conquest regardless of the ultimate outcome of the conflict.²¹ Importantly, and just as argued here, they also describe how many officers believe that their continued advancement supports the interest of their nation, and "this predisposition allows ambitious officers who wish to advance their own interests by seizing territory to believe that they concomitantly serve their nation."²² Claims in this vein have been made in many places throughout history. In this study, Douglas Haig was accused of this act, as were Mark W. Clark and the "war managers" of Vietnam. Indeed, for every example of this allegation presented in the previous chapters, there are hundreds more. Even if only one-tenth of them are correct, this is probably more than acceptable and we should seek to eliminate this possibility. There are many individual and organizational effects that stem from the status and reputation focus of servicemembers; the possibility that even a single individual might trade a life for increased status is by far the most pernicious.

Individual Effects

The individual servicemember is affected the most by the system described here, not least by the possibility described in the previous section in that a war might start due to these dynamics. There are many other ways status and reputation-focused self-interest manifests; some with more obvious implica-

²¹ Dan Altman and Melissa M. Lee, "Why Territorial Disputes Escalate: The Causes of Conquest Attempts since 1945," *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (October 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac076>.

²² Altman and Lee, "Why Territorial Disputes Escalate."

tions than others. First, it is important to recall the point made in chapter 3: although military demographics are changing in the United States and elsewhere, the most aggressive status seekers (young men) are those who most commonly join the Service. Unfortunately for them and for those who are charged with their care, one of the ways this demographic group seeks status is by engaging in risky activity.²³ The reader should not be surprised then at the number of police encounters, accidents, and other incidents many of these young men are involved in. Social norms of behavior within the military have become more stringent since the advent of the all-volunteer force, and status-driven risk taking is not given the same leeway it once was, but it remains a real concern. Importantly, recruiting demographics may not align well with expectations of behavior, and that may, in turn, be a driver for peacetime discipline problems.²⁴

Next, and perhaps most importantly, rigid systems that focus on status like the military have direct, negative health impacts on the people who live within them. To be more direct, the status stratification of the military system paired with heavy focus on status differences among people within it likely *causes* illness in many of those who serve. Epidemiologist and researcher Michael Marmot has studied status differences across many different systems and his findings are stark: someone's position in a status hierarchy is directly correlated with all-cause illness and mortality. His findings suggest that this status health effect, or what he calls "The Status Syndrome," is *independent* of other decisions that influence health; for example, smokers one rank lower in the status hierarchy are more likely to get lung cancer than those higher up, regardless of the fact that the incidence of lung cancer from smoking should be essentially the same among all socioeconomic groups.²⁵ These findings have been confirmed in different genders, social organizations, and even in baboons.²⁶

Marmot believes much of this stems from a loss of control over someone's

²³ Michael C. Ashton et al., "Status-Driven Risk Taking and the Major Dimensions of Personality," *Journal of Research in Personality* 44, no. 6 (December 2010): 734–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2010.09.003>.

²⁴ It should be noted that this point applies almost entirely to peacetime; during wartime, these same risk-driven status seekers are the population many militaries seek.

²⁵ Michael Marmot, *The Status Syndrome: How Social Standing Affects Our Health and Longevity* (New York: Times Books, 2004).

²⁶ Storr, *The Status Game*, 17.

circumstances when living or working as a part of a strict hierarchy; this is exactly the structure within which military servicemembers exist and, unlike many of the other occupations in his study, servicemembers exist in their hierarchy all the time. Other research suggests that negative health outcomes might result from excessive cortisol production when someone's social status comes under threat, and some findings attribute these effects to different types of status interpretation and hierarchies rather than basic socioeconomic status like Marmot does.²⁷ Regardless of the exact mechanism, it is entirely possible, likely even, that the strict status hierarchy of the military creates negative health outcomes among its people. In the modern environment of long service, professional militaries (in the United States, healthcare is often provided to those who have served long after they retire), this outcome is problematic at best. To put it bluntly, the strict hierarchy and rank structure of the military may cause its people to be less healthy. In turn, this likely decreases warfighting effectiveness and dramatically increases the cost of caring for servicemembers while they are serving and during their lifetimes after they leave service.

In addition to potentially causing health problems, low status is correlated with effects on cognition and memory. One study described this effect as “nefarious,” and it is critically important for the military. Even as military and civilian thinkers argue that modern warfare is more complex than it has ever been and claim the need for “cognitive overmatch,” it appears that the rigid and extremely stratified status system within the military might *cause* cogni-

²⁷ Sally S. Dickerson and Margaret E. Kemeny, “Acute Stressors and Cortisol Responses: A Theoretical Integration and Synthesis of Laboratory Research,” *Psychological Bulletin* 130, no. 3 (2004): 355–91, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.3.355>; and Cameron Anderson et al., “The Local-Ladder Effect: Social Status and Subjective Well-Being,” *Psychological Science* 23, no. 7 (2012): 764–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611434537>. This study finds that *sociometric* status is more important for individuals’ subjective well-being than *socioeconomic* status. In the military, this distinction is unlikely to be as critical, since socioeconomic and sociometric status are delineated by explicit, formal, visual status identifiers and there is rarely a significant distinction to be found. The two categories are much more similar in a military context than in many other professions or social groups.

tive problems.²⁸ As one study on the “neural and psychological foundations of status perception” described, “These findings suggest an awareness of one’s subordinate standing within a group can interfere with cognitive abilities.”²⁹ Although the authors explain this effect may be due to self-fulfilling prophecy instead of directly due to the status of those tested, for the military the point stands: awareness of one’s low status is “akin to a cognitive load, impairing executive processes.”³⁰ In a time where nearly every military Service in the Western world claims the need for smarter, better educated servicemembers, the basic structure of the Service may in fact make its people dumber and less able to handle complex problem sets.

Next, extensive evidence shows that the system selects for those who are best at playing the status game. As discussed in the introduction to part 1 and further in chapter 4, the people who “act the part” and “look the part” have an advantage over others who compete for status. Compounding this is what sociologist Robert K. Merton first called the “Matthew Effect” in 1968. Essentially, Merton described an early form of path dependence. With the Matthew Effect, scientists who accrued status early in their careers (earned or not) continued to accrue greater status throughout the rest of their career.³¹ Sometimes described as cumulative advantage, this effect has been well documented since Merton first described it and has important implications for the military.³² This effect should question whether military evaluation and promotion systems promote the best people, or if they instead select for those who have already begun to accrue status. In 2018, a pseudonymous U.S. Air Force officer described this effect in detail in the online military forum *War*

²⁸ For examples of discussions on the “complexity of modern war,” see Alexander Frank, “Complexity, Psychology, and Modern War,” *Small Wars Journal*, 17 November 2015; Jeff Hubler and Conner Love, “Tactics and the Human Factor,” Modern War Institute, 24 April 2018; and Todd Schmidt, “The Missing Domain of War: Achieving Cognitive Overmatch on Tomorrow’s Battlefield,” Modern War Institute, 7 April 2020.

²⁹ Jessica E. Koski, Hongling Xie, and Ingrid R. Olson, “Understanding Social Hierarchies: The Neural and Psychological Foundations of Status Perception,” *Social Neuroscience* 10, no. 5 (2015): 527–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2015.1013223>.

³⁰ Koski, Xie, and Olson, “Understanding Social Hierarchies.”

³¹ Robert K. Merton, “The Matthew Effect in Science,” *Science* 159, no. 3810 (1968): 56–63, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.159.3810.56>.

³² Matthew S. Bothner, Joel M. Podolny, and Edward Bishop Smith, “Organizing Contests for Status: The Matthew Effect vs. the Mark Effect,” *Management Science* 57, no. 3 (2011): 439–57, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1100.1281>.

on the Rocks, writing how officers were preselected as potential future generals at the rank of captain (O-3), four ranks and roughly 15 years before they would even have the *opportunity* to compete to be general officers. They also described the way those “high potential officers” would regularly be given chances their peers were not, and their failures were ignored or treated as learning opportunities.³³

The most important point here is that, in a system like this, the winners are chosen *decades* in advance, sometimes without the system even realizing it is happening. The path dependence of a system like this makes it a near certainty that many of the best servicemembers fall through the cracks. While the Air Force example was a particularly egregious example of the Matthew Effect, it is likely that manifestations of it exist throughout military systems. In the Marine Corps, for example, many flying squadrons are forced to “pick winners” early in pilots’ careers, choosing which promising young officers will attend the most prestigious instructor schools and thus placing them on a trajectory for promotion over that of their peers. Interestingly, this is rarely based purely on flying acumen, but is instead due to career timing and ability to complete the course with sufficient time left at their duty station, in their squadron, and on their contract.³⁴

The effect of luck on this status accrual is also critically important and yet impossible to quantify. Timing and career assignments can be everything; officers who find themselves in command in the right place at the right time are far more likely to advance than those who had the bad luck of commanding or serving on staffs in times and places that did not provide them the “right” opportunities. Although this is an oft-remarked fact of the military “meritocracy,” it is rarely discussed or addressed by those who manage and design promotion systems.³⁵ Occupational specialty plays an equally important role. Within the Services that prioritize ground combat, the vast majority

³³ Ned Stark, “A Call for Senior Officer Reform in the Air Force: An Insider’s Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, 14 May 2018. Notably, the Air Force has since recognized many of the problems with this system and sought to correct it. Nonetheless, the problem persists in different areas.

³⁴ Author’s personal discussion with multiple Marine squadron commanders and members.

³⁵ Mylander, *The Generals*, 152–54.

of senior ranks go to ground combat personnel.³⁶ Similarly, within the Air Force, pilots have a higher status than many other personnel (and within that population, what *type* of pilot matters), and the Navy prefers surface warfare officers, pilots, or submariners over intelligence or supply officers. Those who seek status within a given Service will gravitate to the fields that produce the most high-ranking officers or senior enlisted servicemembers.³⁷ An additional, ancillary effect of this dynamic is that those who do not seek to make the military a career will often gravitate toward occupational specialties that provide greater status (and hence, job opportunities) outside the Service, further exacerbating differences between occupational specialties.³⁸

Even if luck and deliberate selection of occupational specialty is not a primary factor in an individual's advancement, the phenomenon once known as "ticket punching" is likely to be. This is the bureaucracy's assignment of status markers to particular jobs within a given career field. At various times, the Services have sought to either eliminate or emphasize it, and most militaries do it to some degree. It has pernicious effects, to be sure. Some Services or militaries provide specific roadmaps that each officer or enlisted member is expected to follow; promotions are highly structured based on these career plans. In other places, specific duties are incentivized and given additional weight at promotions. In all cases, individuals who seek to advance in service will likely gravitate to these incentives and we will see the Matthew Effect in the personnel makeup of occupational specialties within a Service. One place this is likely to have an outsized effect is in recruit training. The Services incentivize individuals to become instructors at their entry-level recruit

³⁶ For example, since 1983, only one Commandant of the Marine Corps has *not* been an infantry officer. Allan R. Millett, "The US Marine Corps, 1973–2017: Cultural Preservation in Every Place and Clime," in *The Culture of Military Organizations*, ed. Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 387, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108622752.017>.

³⁷ This is particularly pernicious as it relates to identity groups within the military. Bishop Garrison, "Challenges to Improving Racial Representation in the Military," CNAS, 12 August 2020. For examples of specific groups within the Services gaining leadership positions and shaping policy, see Robert F. Williams, *The Airborne Mafia: The Paratroopers Who Shaped America's Cold War Army* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025); Malcolm Gladwell, *The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War* (New York: Little, Brown, 2021); and Thomas West Hubbard, "The Fighter Mafia: Vietnam, The Fighter Jet, and the Future of the Air Force" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2014).

³⁸ For a recent manifestation of this problem, see John Vandiver, "Army and Marines Plagued by Turnover Problem in Cyber Fields, GAO Finds," *Stars and Stripes*, 29 December 2022.

training. In some places, like the Marine Corps, it is given a special duty rating and known to make one more competitive for promotion to the highest enlisted ranks. As discussed in chapter 3, recruit training likely has some effect on socializing recruits to be more sensitive to status markers; making it a necessary billet for the most ambitious and status-seeking enlisted personnel is sure to have some effect on this dynamic.

Beyond the Matthew Effect and related consequences of entering a pathway of cumulative advantage, it is likely that the promotion system also simply selects for those who are most interested in advancing in rank.³⁹ Although this is an obvious fact in almost any personnel system, in a system that already prizes personal status and reputation, it becomes self-reinforcing or almost a tautology. The ambitious officer seeks to accrue status and reputation, and status-seeking makes them act in a more self-interested and ambitious fashion. The system selects for these individuals, and they are then placed on promotion boards where they, in turn, select the individuals who have status markers that resemble theirs. The cycle begins again, and the system perpetuates status and reputation as its primary criteria for success.

As many of these examples suggest, this dynamic of socialization into a culture and environment that prioritizes status and reputation has important implications for individual behavior within such a system. In Christopher R. Browning's seminal work, *Ordinary Men*, he describes the actions of Nazi *Reserve Police Battalion 101*, which was one of the units that implemented genocide on the eastern front during World War II as part of the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads). Important for this discussion, the members of the unit who were most able to resist orders to commit atrocities were those who did not seek to maximize their personal status within the military environment. The refusers were those who had careers and established status outside the military environment and thus were *not* status and reputation maximizing within it. They were able to refuse to act because they did not seek status and reputation gain from their military peers and seniors.⁴⁰

Although obviously extreme and anecdotal, this is nonetheless a powerful example of how military ambition and status maximizing might create an environment where those of the highest status within a unit and those who

³⁹ Gordon Tullock best articulates this phenomenon in *Bureaucracy*, ed. Charles K. Rowley, vol. 6 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 21–22.

⁴⁰ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Gardners Books, 2001), 167.

sought increased status—formal and informal—might not be willing or able to disobey orders even if they were obviously unacceptable. Individuals in *Reserve Police Battalion 101* who sought to maintain or increase their status and reputation within the military were psychologically able and willing to commit the most heinous crimes. The members of the battalion who had sufficient status outside the military and did not intend to stay in the service were able to ignore this dynamic. The obvious concern for insular modern militaries is that nonprofessional soldiers are likely to be missing in most units; it is rare for a modern volunteer military to have members who also have significant status outside the Service they normally belong to. Although *Reserve Police Battalion 101* is an extreme example, a volunteer, career, professional military force might be susceptible to this problem to some degree while one that includes citizen soldiers could be somewhat protected from it. It is important to recognize that status and reputation dynamics, particularly if status and reputation come to be outside or in a way different from the formal rules and regulations of the organization, might result in significant problems. This has been apparent in several examples already discussed, and it is common in many small units or other formations.⁴¹

The Matthew Effect and other cumulative advantages represent a pathway toward individual status in the Service, but they are not the only way. Informal status, while more difficult to establish and keep in a system that gives such credence to formal status markers, is nonetheless important. The American military has a longstanding relationship with informal status; indeed, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was essentially the only way for an officer or senior enlisted member to advance within the system, as promotions were mostly nonexistent.⁴² In the modern military, informal status generally has had less cachet, although it is not uncommon for those who work for senior leaders to develop a reputation within the Service or those who become known for heroic acts to achieve a degree of notoriety (and thus status) that outweighs their formal rank.⁴³ In more recent years, the military has struggled with managing status markers beyond the formal rank

⁴¹ Anna Simons, "How Ambiguity Results in Excellence: The Role of Hierarchy and Reputation in U.S. Army Special Forces," *Human Organization* 57, no. 1 (1998): 117–23, <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.57.1.r3087l37m1516871>.

⁴² Mylander, *The Generals*, 53.

⁴³ As one Army Command Sergeant Major described to the author, "you don't make general officer in the Army unless you are known to have a 'daddy' (patron)." Interview with the author, December 2024.

system; for example, it has been common on the social media platform Twitter (now X) for high-ranking general officers and senior enlisted leaders to defer to (or enter into unnecessary disputes with) accounts owned by junior enlisted servicemembers or those who lack obvious military status on a range of issues.⁴⁴ The primary reason for this deference appears to be that these accounts have a large number of followers—a different status marker altogether.

Ultimately, deferring to an account with a large number of followers on Twitter (X) or anywhere in the public sphere is an act of reputation management. Loss of reputation or other status attacks are particularly common in the social media world, and military leaders who are by their nature and culture particularly attuned to reputation and status are likely to be uniquely sensitive to them. This sensitivity leads to many potential missteps in the public sphere that degrade trust in individual leaders and ripple into other areas that affect the capabilities and effectiveness of the organization as a whole.⁴⁵

High status, in particular, often comes with associated costs. There are many ways this is known to manifest. First, high status “leads audiences to raise their performance expectations while increasing visibility and accompanying scrutiny.”⁴⁶ For military leaders, often critically concerned with reputation for themselves and their units, this can be a significant problem. Many self-promoting or unit-promoting leaders find themselves in trouble with this dynamic as observers take them at their word and expect more than they can deliver. The U.S. military had issues many times during the wars of the twenty-first century, perhaps most famously with the failure of first General Stanley A. McChrystal and then General David H. Petraeus’s much vaunted

⁴⁴ For example, see Davis Winkie, “Pat Donahoe, Civilian, Wants a Word with the Army,” *Army Times*, 5 January 2023. This study takes no position on whether this engagement was warranted, only that this illustrates an example of direct engagement that senior leaders would not have typically been involved in as recently as the early 2010s.

⁴⁵ For discussion of these dynamics, see Todd Schmidt, “Civilian Control of the Military: A ‘Useful Fiction’?,” *Military Review*, February 2023; Carl Forsling, “Opinion: Confidence in the Military Erodes as Culture Wars Rage,” *Task & Purpose*, 2 January 2023; Zack Cooper, Melanie Marlowe, and Christopher Preble, “Not Their Plane to Land: Generals Thwarting the Chain of Command?,” *War on the Rocks*, 1 September 2022; and Luke J. Schumacher, “Subtweets Are Partisan Too: Why Retired Generals Can’t Avoid the Parties,” *War on the Rocks*, 27 August 2020.

⁴⁶ Gerard George et al., “From the Editors: Reputation and Status: Expanding the Role of Social Evaluations in Management Research,” *Academy of Management Journal* 59, no. 1 (February 2016): 1–13.

application of counterinsurgency doctrine to Afghanistan, which under scrutiny was far from a success.⁴⁷

There are other ways high status can potentially create blowback effects. One recent study showed that high-status actors tend to become complacent and thus often do not deliver the results that observers expect of them.⁴⁸ Others show evidence to support the well-known tendency for high-status actors to “fall from grace,” whether because of increased scrutiny, the human tendency to limit others’ status (recall the hunter-gatherer tribes and basic human tendencies in chapters 4 and 5), or a mix of the two. High status appears to also correlate with military ethical fading. Mara Karlin describes how the “Defense Department Inspector General’s tally of [senior officer] misconduct shows a massive uptick in [ethics] complaints and violations since 2008.”⁴⁹ This is not unique to the military, though, as a number of studies “show that high status, or upper-class individuals are more likely to make unethical decisions, break the law while driving, and even lie or cheat to get their way.”⁵⁰ The authors of one study suggest that high-status individuals are also *less* likely to recognize, sympathize with, or adopt the perspective of another individual. This exacerbates the likelihood of high-status individuals’ rule breaking since they have difficulty conceptualizing how it affects others.⁵¹ Thus, high status appears to encourage rule breaking and a lack of empathy, the opposite of what modern militaries hope to inculcate in their leaders. Interestingly, informal status appears to correlate in much the same way, as many of the recent ethical problems in the United States and other Western militaries’ special operations formations can attest.⁵²

⁴⁷ Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 344, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139226301>; and Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 278–79.

⁴⁸ George et al., “From the Editors.”

⁴⁹ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 184.

⁵⁰ Koski, Xie, and Olson, “Understanding Social Hierarchies.”

⁵¹ Koski, Xie, and Olson, “Understanding Social Hierarchies.”

⁵² For examples, see Corey Dickstein, “Army Special Operators Face Drug Investigation at Fort Bragg,” *Stars and Stripes*, 11 January 2023; David Philipps, *Alpha: Eddie Gallagher and the War for the Soul of the Navy SEALs* (New York: Crown, 2021); and “Afghanistan Inquiry: The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry,” Defence, Australian Government, 19 November 2020.

Organizational Effects

The organizational effects of status-seeking behavior are significant as well. As James N. Mattis once wrote and the previous paragraphs suggest, “An organization gets the behavior it rewards.”⁵³ In the case of the military, the system rewards self-interest. As discussed here, this is nothing unusual. Essentially every bureaucracy or hierarchy rewards self-interested behavior. The unique character of the military, however, is that most avenues for supporting self-interest are closed to actors within it. Hence, status and reputation maximizing behavior are seen where it would otherwise be one of many possible motivations. Because of this, it is common to see competition between organizations similar to the competition between individuals. Aside from the fact that organizations competing within the military are unlikely to serve a collective grand strategy or the public good, there are other potential implications from this sort of conflict as well.⁵⁴

As discussed in the previous chapters, intra-Service and unit competition is *by definition* self-interested and contrary to the public good. As units compete for resources, missions, and prestige, they inherently limit the ability of a disinterested, completely informed decision maker or set of decision makers to choose the most effective option for a given scenario.⁵⁵ Although the Services often take a tongue-in-cheek perspective toward inter-Service competition, they are also known to fight ferociously over perceived infringements on their bureaucratic turf. Service staffs regularly make concerted efforts to delay, prevent, or limit the other Services’ abilities to accomplish initiatives that appear to infringe on the others’ prerogatives in what looks very

⁵³ Jim Mattis and Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2019), 48.

⁵⁴ There is one stream of thinking that suggests this is *exactly* the public good however. The framing of this argument is usually one of efficiency versus effectiveness, and the this is a valid and reasonable argument. However, the argument assumes that competition uses and results in something like the free market, and market signals are the drivers of Service behavior. This is incorrect. This study would instead suggest that individual self-interest is a more likely driver of this competition and is thus unlikely to result in the free-market-driven effectiveness that proponents of this viewpoint claim.

⁵⁵ As readers will recognize, the author does not believe this is possible; but even if it were, the competition between organizations would prevent it from working effectively.

much like status competition to achieve greater resources and deference.⁵⁶

The reason for seeking additional resources should be generally obvious, as one way the Services accrue status and reputation is through greater budgets—and one way to accrue greater budgets is through higher status. As the reader will recall from chapter 3, however, budget maximization alone does not pass the test as a primary motivator for most individuals within the Service. The search for deference is another way to accrue status, as civilians will regularly defer to the Services that have higher status and reputation within military forces. In the United States, this generally means deferring to a Service that is more important in a given mission or location (e.g., the U.S. Navy in the Pacific theater). In other examples, this could mean civilians and leaders deferring to particular assets or Services such as Field Marshal Douglas Haig's cavalry or General Heinz Guderian's *panzers*, as described in chapters 6, 7, and 8. In practice, this results in additional missions for the "more important" Service and has downstream effects on multiple other parts of the overall military organization.

This competition creates dynamics within and between the Services that can be problematic for Joint operations and decisions regarding the best military options. Some of the most pernicious American competitions (and thus shaping of military operations) in this regard can be seen in pre-Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act operations in the Dominican Republic or Grenada. In the former, DOD units are said to have actually *raced* each other to arrive on scene, while in the latter each Service sent their preferred contribution with little to no coordination or deliberate planning.⁵⁷

In many cases, particularly at the highest echelons, status and reputation can often serve as a proxy for actual capability. If a unit or organization is ef-

⁵⁶ Mylander, *The Generals*, 218. Since Mylander described this in 1974, much has changed. However, this dynamic has not. The author discussed this dynamic with multiple current and former Pentagon staff officers who served there during the twenty-first century as well as others who served on major staffs. All of them concurred that this dynamic is still very much the norm between the Services and the higher echelon commands.

⁵⁷ Mylander, *The Generals*, 229–30; and Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Grenada, 12 October–2 November 1983* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997), 65. This official history blandly describes a need for forces beyond the original Marine battalion landing team; it is less direct describing the political maneuvering that resulted in a fully Joint response such as the one that eventually came together.

fective at building a *perception* of competence or skill, they are likely to be preferred in many missions, because higher echelon leadership may believe the perception and because it supports a larger public narrative that we are sending our best. Although some might argue that the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act eliminated much of this problem, there is much evidence to provide the counterpoint.⁵⁸ Some have also claimed that this makes special operations units and other elite formations particularly attractive to many in the modern political and media environment; any negative repercussion might be blunted with the narrative that “at least we sent the best.” This combines with the secretive nature of such formations to greatly mitigate risk (i.e., the possibility of losing reputation) for the senior members of the military and political establishment.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, continued employment is often popular with the lower-level members of such formations: as described earlier here and in chapter 7, one of the best ways for such members to quickly build personal and unit status is to participate in high-risk, high-reward operations.

Within the U.S. military community, Service, unit, or platform-based status signifiers have long been known to create dynamics beyond those of particular qualifications or capabilities. As mentioned in the section discussing occupational-specialty related selection effects, whether the “airborne mafia” of the Vietnam-era Army, the “fighter mafia” of the Gulf War-era Air Force, the World War I-era British cavalry, or the special operations force communities, reputation and status have created dynamics that affected their employment well beyond mere interpretations of their past performance. More pernicious, perhaps, is that these status and reputation dynamics create conflicts and problems within and among the Services and other stakeholders.

Like the reputation attacks described in chapter 4, status blowback within and between communities is common. This is likely a manifestation of the tendency, as with individuals, for those with high status to receive additional scrutiny. The important implication for militaries here is that as different organizations jockey for influence and control, they are likely to simultaneously create negative perceptions among competing organizations, exacerbating inter-Service conflict and limiting the ability of leaders to dispassionately

⁵⁸ See LtGen Michael P. DeLong, quoted in Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 84; and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 63–67.

⁵⁹ Thomas Waldman, *Vicarious Warfare: American Strategy and the Illusion of War on the Cheap* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023), 191–93.

choose the most effective option. Some organizational statuses become highly polarized; for example, the U.S. Navy SEAL community simultaneously has a reputation within U.S. military communities as elite but also undisciplined, hard to manage, and occasionally untrustworthy.⁶⁰ This not only has implications for how and where units are employed, but might be important for choices of leadership, including senior leadership within specific formations and higher-level leadership of the military as a whole.

Leaders of military organizations are usually chosen based on a combination of reputation and status. Their selection by more senior military or political leaders is based on their existing reputation and status combined with a prediction of their likely future ability. When leaders are chosen from polarizing communities—those that have both high reputation and status and negative reputation and status—it can cause significant problems within a Service, organization, or agency. An example of this might be the selection of General James F. Amos as the Commandant of the Marine Corps in the early 2010s; he was obviously exceptionally qualified for the job and was by definition one of the top aviators in the Service. However, it became clear early in his term as Commandant that his status as an aviator degraded his standing among several communities within the Marine Corps. He experienced a number of public attacks and different informal status groups within the Corps showed their distrust and delivered an extraordinary amount of (usually unwarranted) negative feedback during (and since) his tenure.⁶¹

Other important effects on organizations result from the military's aggressive focus on status and reputation as well. The various recruiting commands within the Services strongly believe that the way the American public (or publics in other Western nations) perceives the status of military service is directly correlated with a metric known as “propensity to serve.” Framing effects of how the Services present themselves to potential recruits are also critical; for example, whereas the U.S. Marine Corps once framed itself as the “first to fight” and the toughest of all the Services, it is often no longer perceived that way. Recruits who previously might have sought out the Ma-

⁶⁰ For example, see non-SEAL leadership opinions of the SEAL platoon described in Philipps, *Alpha*. Also see David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “How to Fix U.S. Special Operations Forces,” *War on the Rocks*, 25 February 2020. The author has personally seen or experienced both sides of this reputation in combat and in other peacetime operations.

⁶¹ For example, see Aaron MacLean, “What’s the Matter with Jim Amos?,” *Washington Free Beacon* (blog), 13 October 2014.

rine Corps seeking a challenge or a test now often enlist directly into special operations formations and avoid the Marine Corps.⁶² This dynamic can also be seen periodically as the Services frame themselves as a place to earn money for college or a way to learn a skill for future employment. The U.S. Army National Guard is particularly adept at this form of public messaging.⁶³

In a modern media environment, characterized by disintermediation, rapid spread of information (true or false), and the public assumption that government narratives are often less than truthful, status- and reputation-focused decisions are likely to have much larger blowback effects than in previous eras. Some have attributed the near collapse of U.S. military recruiting efforts (at the time of this writing) to this dynamic, and when Services and leaders take action that appears transparently targeted at accruing additional Service status or protecting their personal or Service reputation (colloquially referred to as “cover your ass,” or CYA), the public outcry is significant.⁶⁴ In some cases, the organizations might weather the storm of media attention, such as the seemingly insane sequence of events surrounding the Navy’s relief of Captain Brett E. Crozier, captain of the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) in 2020, followed by the resignation of Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas B. Modly; but in others, the damage might be much more far reaching.⁶⁵ More famous examples of a Service protecting its reputation at the cost of the truth include events such as the tragic death of former NFL football player and Army Ranger Patrick

⁶² Personal correspondence with a senior Marine Corps Recruiting Command staff officer, 17 January 2023.

⁶³ For example, see “Army National Guard-Get Started,” NationalGuard.com, accessed 7 January 2025.

⁶⁴ How individual dishonesty relates to organizational reputation is complex and often depends on the perception of the individual who has been lied to. However, since organizational and individual reputations often converge at the top of the pyramid (chapter 4), it stands to reason that leaders lying to the public (or manipulating information to CYA) will have a greater reputational effect on the public as a whole than lower-level individuals. For discussion of employee lying and organizational reputation, see Karen A. Jehn and Elizabeth D. Scott, “Lies in the Sky: Effects of Employee Dishonesty on Organizational Reputation in the Airline Industry,” *Business and Society Review* 120, no. 1 (2015): 115–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/basr.12050>.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, see John M. Hinck, Steven B. Davis, and Edward A. Hinck, “A Case Study of What Was at Stake during the USS *Roosevelt*’s COVID-19 Outbreak: Navigating,” *Fairchild Papers*, 8 July 2022; and for military involvement in “culture war,” see Forsling, “Opinion.”

D. Tillman; whether intentional or not, the Army perpetrated an extensive and false narrative of events that eventually led to massive public outcry.⁶⁶

More far-reaching examples of this sort of reputation management are common in recent years and in the past. The description of the My Lai cover-up in chapter 7 is perhaps the worst of such events, and the reader will recall several others described at the end of chapter 8. In more recent times, some have alleged that unreported sexual assaults and other crimes throughout the Services were due to a cover up within the ranks.⁶⁷ There is also evidence that underreporting of these crimes is due to a perception that doing so could result in personal reputational harm.⁶⁸ Beyond discussion of specific examples, of which there are many, people often have an innate sense when those above them in the hierarchy act to favor their status-seeking and/or protect their personal or organizational reputation; most take a negative view of this behavior.⁶⁹ In the era of modern media, where hiding or even obfuscating specific actions is more difficult, blatant attempts to manage reputation or status will have ever more deleterious organizational effects. Much of the loss of public trust in the military (as of the time of this writing) might be attributed to this dynamic; it exists within the ranks as well.⁷⁰ If the military persists in actions the public perceives as senior officer or organizational reputation management—actions such as assigning punishment based off formal status, often called “different spanks for different ranks,” or removing or punishing lower ranking members while protecting more senior individ-

⁶⁶ *The Tillman Fratricide: What the Leadership of the Defense Department Knew*, Hearing before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, 110th Cong., 1st Sess. (1 August 2007); and Steve Adubato, *What Were They Thinking?: Crisis Communication: The Good, the Bad, and the Totally Clueless* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 79–89.

⁶⁷ For example, one nationally known commentator explicitly called these events “a culture of coverup.” Although one might read this as hyperbole, the underlying sentiment is common if rarely expressed in such stark terms. See Naomi Wolf, “A Culture of Coverup: Rape in the Ranks of the US Military,” *Guardian*, 14 June 2012.

⁶⁸ *Fort Hood 2020: The Findings and Recommendations of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 116th Cong., 2d Sess. (9 December 2020).

⁶⁹ Hee Young Kim and Nathan C. Pettit, “Status Is a Four-Letter Word: Self versus Other Differences and Concealment of Status-Striving,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6, no. 3 (April 2015): 267–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550614555030>.

⁷⁰ Thaddeus Drake, “Trust Decay,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 106, no. 6 (2022): 62–66.

uals—trust within and outside the Services will almost certainly decline at a precipitous rate.⁷¹

The last organizational implication of public choice thinking that will be addressed here regards doctrine. If, using public choice thinking, we recognize that members of the military are going to make self-interested decisions and generally prioritize status and reputation, we should not expect written doctrine (how a military claims it intends to fight) to have significant effect. Instead of using their published Service doctrine, we should expect individuals to make decisions based on the exigencies of a particular circumstance, although training (in accordance with written doctrine) would certainly inform this decision. In the event that written doctrine is used to shape an organizational culture through training, personnel decisions, and organizational objectives, then it will surely influence this decision making; however, much doctrine is merely a collection of espoused values that does not actually affect organizational culture.⁷² As historian Andrew Gordon writes, “Military cultures impart doctrine by corporate ambience as much as by explicit teaching.”⁷³ Austin Long agrees, writing that “there can be significant difference between [written and practiced doctrine].”⁷⁴ Instead of following written doctrine, individuals make decisions in keeping with their personal interest and the organizational culture within which they exist. Instead of thinking of doctrine as an articulation of how militaries intend to fight, it might better be understood as a messaging tool or one more way to seek status.

Barry Posen wrote in *The Sources of Military Doctrine* that organization theory predicts that without civilian intervention militaries would establish a “negotiated environment” where they “preserve a customary budget split or divide shares equally.” He goes on to say that “each service will prepare for its own war.”⁷⁵ Public choice theory certainly agrees with this prediction. Importantly, militaries also might attempt to use their preferred doctrine to

⁷¹ Paul Yingling wrote most memorably about this phenomenon, stating in 2007 that “as matters stand now, a private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war.” Paul Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship,” *Armed Forces Journal*, 1 May 2007.

⁷² Andrew Milburn, “Losing Small Wars: Why US Military Culture Leads to Defeat,” *Small Wars Journal*, 12 September 2021.

⁷³ Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (London: John Murray, 1996), 580.

⁷⁴ Austin Long, *The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 21.

⁷⁵ Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 54.

shape national policy. This can be seen in many Cold War arguments about deterrence, changes to doctrine after the Vietnam War, and most famously, in some historians' arguments that the German invasion of France to start World War I (the Schlieffen Plan) was never an actionable military plan but instead a document seeking to shape Imperial German budgets, force structure, and inter-Service competition.⁷⁶

Militaries also use doctrine to accrue status from external audiences, as might be seen in the widespread promotion of *Counterinsurgency* (Field Manual 3-24), the Joint Army and Marine Corps doctrine published to much public fanfare in 2006. Individual leaders like David Petraeus used the publication of this document to gain personal status, but the Army and Marine Corps also created a public affairs campaign around it that included celebrity historian reviews and sales of the publication in bookstores around the United States. It is likely that *Counterinsurgency* is the only military manual to receive a positive book review in the *New York Times* and certainly the only one in the last several decades.⁷⁷ Similarly, the Marine Corps sold *Warfighting* (FMFM-1) (and its revised edition, MCDP-1) throughout the business world, and perhaps most well-known, many different airpower advocates have taken their doctrine to the public, seeking to circumvent contradictory viewpoints by accruing the perception of status in the public domain that the Services might otherwise have stifled or prevented.⁷⁸

There are any number of other organizational implications that might stem from status- and reputation-maximizing behavior; the paragraphs above touch on some of the most basic. The most important point from these examples and implications is that the dynamics described here are likely changeable. That is not to suggest that status-seeking and reputation management are not ingrained in the human condition—far from it—this book argues exactly the opposite. It is also not to claim that it would necessarily be better to change the existing dynamics; indeed, some have recently claimed that

⁷⁶ David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 18–19; and Holger H. Herwig, “Through the Looking Glass: German Strategic Planning before 1914,” *Historian* 77, no. 2 (2015): 290–314.

⁷⁷ Samantha Power, “Our War on Terror,” *New York Times*, 29 July 2007.

⁷⁸ Mark A. Clodfelter, “Molding Airpower Convictions: Development and Legacy of William Mitchell’s Strategic Thought,” in *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, ed. Phillip S. Meilinger (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1997), 90–92. *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997) and *Warfighting*, Fleet Marine Force Manual 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1989).

social climbing is not just a necessary part of the human condition, but that it is in fact a positive thing in and of itself.⁷⁹ Although this book neither takes a normative position on status and reputation maximizing nor intends to propose concrete recommendations—it seeks to *describe*, not *prescribe*—there are any number of systemic changes, both major and minor, that would have the potential to minimize or mitigate the issues that arise from status and reputation maximizing within the military.

However, it is also critical to understand that there is no magic bullet. In the framing of this theory, there is no way to change the fundamental characteristics of human nature; public choice theory (and all of microeconomics) tells us that people will respond to incentives. The current incentives (and limitations) for military behavior and decision-making influence the people within military systems to seek status and reputation most often out of the set of possible motivations. If the incentives change to support efforts to enrich oneself, become overwhelmingly politically powerful, or some other motivation that has yet to be identified by public choice theorists and political economists, then we should expect people to change the utility that they attempt to maximize, consciously and subconsciously alike. There are no ideal human systems, there are only systems that make trade-offs. All militaries would likely be better served if they and their civilian masters understood this fact and deliberately considered the motivations they seek to maximize. Although it is beyond the scope of this book, it is both possible and desirable to design a system that produces behaviors other than those described in the examples discussed here. Military effectiveness is one of the most important things a nation can seek; allowing dynamics such as intraorganizational infighting, blind ambition, or deliberate obfuscation to defend one's reputation (among many others) to shape decision making without realizing it is inherently contradictory to this goal.

This, then, is the most important implication this book seeks to develop. If we recognize that individuals, and by extension the organizations in which they exist, are self-interested and seek to maximize unique motivations, then we must also recognize that some motivations are better than others for harnessing the behavior of humans in any system to achieve the broadest goals. Whether those goals are defined as strategy, national interests, policy, Service equities, or some other term, people will make decisions that benefit their interest as they define it. These decisions will aggregate to become the orga-

⁷⁹ Xochitl Gonzalez, “The New Case for Social Climbing,” *Atlantic*, 9 January 2023.

nization's behavior. The way to generate a desired behavior or effect is not through top-down, rational choice decision making, as comforting as that illusion may be. The way to create a desired effect is by developing a system that incentivizes individual actors to opt for specific decisions and behaviors in their personal self-interest.

Counterarguments

Many counterarguments apply to the framing used in this book. The most effective counterargument is that, although many examples to support this argument, there are many others that show military members altruistically sacrificing, serving patriotically, or helping people at different echelons in the hierarchy with no apparent self-interest. We will discuss motivation and falsifiability in a subsequent paragraph, but for the moment it is sufficient to simply agree that sometimes people act in ways that are against their self-interest by almost any definition of the phrase. This is a book about an average distribution; it does not claim to predict or necessarily even describe every individual's behavior in a specific context. Extreme altruism is a real behavior, although it is also considered by those who study it to be quite rare.⁸⁰ It is a behavior that exists on the "long tail" of the average distribution of military behavior. The Jason L. Dunhams and Alwyn C. Cashes of the world exist, and the author honestly believes that, in circumstances such as theirs, they acted out of love for their comrades and a desire to save their lives.⁸¹

However, as discussed in previous sections of the book, this may not prove the theory as wrong as many might feel like it should. Rational self-interest does not mean that someone only acts selfishly or does not take the well-being of others into account. Rational self-interest, in the framing of this book, simply means that someone seeks to maximize some utility that they have defined as valuable. A servicemember sacrificing their life for the benefit of their comrades *does* fit the definition of a rationally self-interested

⁸⁰ Steve Stewart-Williams, *The Ape that Understood the Universe: How the Mind and Culture Evolve* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 208, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108763516>.

⁸¹ Cpl Jason L. Dunham received the Medal of Honor for sacrificing his life to save that of his comrades in Iraq in 2004. He smothered a grenade with his body, almost certainly knowing that such an act would result in his death. For further reading, see Michael M. Phillips, *The Gift of Valor: A War Story* (New York: Crown, 2006). Alwyn Cashe repeatedly returned to a burning vehicle to save his comrades, receiving burns on approximately 72 percent of his body and later dying of his wounds. See "Sergeant First Class Alwyn C. Cashe," Army.mil, accessed 7 January 2025.

act. In this case, the individual values the utility they give to their comrades' lives above their own. To sacrifice in order to save them is thus self-interested. But, the counterpoint might go, this is not *status or reputation maximizing*. The author concedes this point. Some might argue that a sacrifice in this manner could be made to maximize future status, much like the mass shooter who seeks only future notoriety at the likely cost of their life. It would be the height of cynicism to argue that young people at war would sacrifice themselves in search of fame; thus, this chapter rejects the framing entirely. Instead, readers should remember that the claim in this book is not that status and reputation maximization is the right way to understand all military actions all the time but is instead the best way to explain the preponderance of military motivation. Humans have many motivations for everything they do; just because they sometimes seek to maximize rewards other than reputation or status does not mean the theory is wrong. Indeed, in some ways, it might strengthen it.

Some experts on government bureaucracy have also argued that individual rational choice and the principal-agent problem do not explain the “‘principled agents’—workers who do not shirk, subvert, or steal on the job . . . and who often perform ‘thankless tasks’ and make virtual ‘gifts’ of their labor.”⁸² This volume generally agrees with the position that traditional rational choice, particularly focused on monetary remuneration and other tangible benefits, does not well explain these activities within the bureaucracy. Status and reputation maximization does however. Although the servicemember who spends extra hours at work or executes hundreds of thankless tasks every day may not receive extra pay or benefits for doing so (indeed, they often legally cannot), they can—and because of the unique cultural norms found in the military, they will—accrue status and reputation that will redound to their benefit throughout the entirety of their career.

A second counterargument might be that this study has not entirely proven the point. Some readers will feel that cherry picked historical evidence is found throughout the book, and others might suggest that servicemembers' motivations and decision-making frameworks will change throughout the course of a career (e.g., a young staff sergeant looking to make a name for themselves will have drastically different circumstances than a Navy com-

⁸² John D. DiIulio, “Principled Agents: The Cultural Bases of Behavior in a Federal Government Bureaucracy,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 4, no. 3 (1994): 277–318, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a037210>.

mander who is preparing to retire).⁸³ Both are fair criticisms and certainly require deeper exploration than the treatment they are given here. Indeed, counterexamples notwithstanding, the fact also remains that this book is not a rigorous, method-driven, theory-testing work like might be found in modern political science or economics. This volume instead proposes a theory that appears both plausible and generally explanatory, with the hopes that students of military decision making and behavior will use this work as a foundation for further study, research, and testing of the theory. There is room for additional exploration of this framing in the future.

A related argument might be that the book focused too much on Western militaries. This is a valid critique. Additional research and thinking should be done on whether these same dynamics obtain in non-Western militaries. A cursory glance at several wars of the past 50 years suggests that they are likely to be just as common if not more so. For example, Pierre Razoux has written how several early Iraqi decisions in the Iran-Iraq War were made for personal and national prestige. This applied to the national decision to go to war as well as individual general officers within the Iraqi military.⁸⁴ Lawrence Freedman sees similar dynamics in Ariel Sharon's leadership during several of Israel's wars in the latter part of the twentieth century. He titles a chapter on Sharon "The Very Model of Insubordination," and writes that "throughout his career Sharon saw the chain of command as something to be circumvented and manipulated."⁸⁵ In one example from the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Freedman describes Israeli leadership, who viewed Sharon's battlefield efforts as "simple insubordination and self-promotion."⁸⁶ Finally, there appears to be at least preliminary evidence that similar dynamics have shaped Russian actions in their ongoing (at the time of writing) war in Ukraine, as discussed in chapter 2 and we continue to see in Russian combat operations on a nearly daily basis.⁸⁷

Many might also object entirely to the dismissal of grand strategy, organizational rational choice decision making, or other military decision models. This is entirely reasonable. There are many ways to understand military

⁸³ The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

⁸⁴ Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 2015), 56.

⁸⁵ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 136.

⁸⁶ Freedman, *Command*, 125.

⁸⁷ Dara Massicot, "What Russia Got Wrong," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2023.

decision making and command structures. Although this treatment does not agree that the brain-body analogy so many implicitly use to think of military decision and command and control is a useful one, it is nonetheless ubiquitous and can often be helpful for many to think this way. The quote from George Box, “All models are wrong, but some are useful,”⁸⁸ is a helpful way of considering this objection. There are many frames someone might use for thinking about military decisions; in no way does the current volume recommend jettisoning all of them in favor of only applying the public choice model. However, the public choice framing of military decision making presented in this book is a useful addition and corrective to the existing ways many think about military operations.

Some also might object to the fact that this theory seems to be unfalsifiable. Indeed, modern research on the role of status and reputation dynamics in human hierarchies, unconscious motivations and biases, and other similar effects certainly make it seem so. It is completely true that humans make decisions and act in ways that they do not consciously understand. The modern understanding of confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and other heuristics makes this clear.⁸⁹ In this regard, the basic claim of the book—that people act in their self-interest and often claim, and sometimes even believe otherwise—is indeed unfalsifiable. As Robert Jervis has written about statesmen’s behavior, “All we can do is infer operative beliefs from behavior, often by arguing that the explicit reasons given are implausible.”⁹⁰ Several recent books and papers described in chapter 4 and elsewhere in this book articulate that well: status and reputation are fundamental drivers of human behavior, and much of what each of us does is shaped by those drivers, whether we realize it or not.

In this regard, the final point is perhaps also the easiest counterargument to make. If everyone in the military (or in its orbit) seeks to maximize status and reputation, should we not also assume that status- and reputation-maximizing dynamics were drivers for the studies, military histories, and other work cited here? Should we not assume that the author is writing this

⁸⁸ George E. P. Box, “Science and Statistics,” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 71, no. 356 (1976): 791–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2286841>.

⁸⁹ Cass R. Sunstein, “Moral Heuristics,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28, no. 4 (2005): 531–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X05000099>.

⁹⁰ Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 20.

book to maximize status and reputation as well?⁹¹ Indeed, we should. The presentation here sought to mitigate this problem by citing many sources for all the evidence presented in part 1 and in part 2, but the reader should certainly be as skeptical of the author's motivations as of the leaders and soldiers described in the book. The only refutation to be made for this is to claim that this book developed merely to understand, explain, and hopefully help others do the same. The reader will have to follow Robert Jervis' advice in the paragraph above to determine if the espoused motivations and stated intentions are truly correct, or if this book is yet another attempt at status maximizing. As articulated elsewhere, the full explanation is never either/or, but instead is often both/and. Nonetheless, it is left to the reader to determine if this has been a useful exercise or an attempt to gain status and reputation.

The important point made in this book is not that status and reputation are fundamental drivers of all human interactions and often manifest subliminally to shape behavior, although this is indeed the case. The important point regarding status and reputation maximizing is that the military system prioritizes status and reputation, and thus we should assume these motivations to be driving factors behind *most* behavior in the military system. There are certainly other reasons individuals make decisions within the military system, but the case presented here is that the "Occam's Razor" explanation for military behavior for individual and organizational alike is self-interested status and reputation maximization.⁹² More important than this, however, is not to assign motivations for any one particular action or set of actions. We must recognize that organizational action driven by top-down military decisions is a myth. *Individuals* make decisions, and it is their behavior, in aggregate, that shapes and determines the actions of military organizations not the other way around.

⁹¹ The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

⁹² *Occam's Razor* refers to the idea in science that an explanation that includes the fewest possible elements is usually preferred. In modern colloquial usage, it generally refers to the least complex explanation and many often simplify it further to mean the simplest explanation is usually correct. See Susan Borowski, "The Origin and Popular Use of Occam's Razor," American Association for the Advancement of Science: Scientia, 12 June 2012.

Conclusion

Man is not a rational animal; he is a rationalizing animal.

~ Robert A. Heinlein¹

There are two common tendencies in many histories of military operations, studies of different militaries, or other analyses of security studies writ large. First, they often neglect the humanity of subjects *within* the military. It is significantly less complicated to treat militaries as closed systems instead of the messy, contentious, argumentative, self-interested bureaucracies that they are. It also makes sense to treat them as singular components of larger systems; just as a chemist might treat water as a single liquid instead of a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, so too do storytellers, analysts, and theorists often simplify military operations and those who perform the hundreds, thousands, or millions of aggregate tasks, and the genesis of each in an individual decision and action that created it.

This manifests in many ways. It appears often in grand systemic ideas like Kenneth Waltz's "Defensive Realism," where human factors are acknowledged as a necessary part of any system, but it is nonetheless discounted as not particularly important because the nature of the system is essentially unchanging and unchangeable.² It equally appears in more granular studies like those that consider the "black box" of national-level decision making. Famous works like Graham T. Allison's *Essence of Decision* or more modern discussions like Amy Zegart's *Flawed by Design*, do look deeper into the system of interactions

¹ Robert A. Heinlein, *Assignment in Eternity* (Reading, PA: Fantasy Press, 1953), 60.

² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010). For a detailed discussion of the issues with this theory, see Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

that influence and create national security decisions, but they each still also relegate the military to treatment as a black box of its own. Although this is absolutely necessary for each to develop the argument and theory found in their important and instructive works, it has left a significant gap in the general understanding of military decision making.

The second tendency of historians and thinkers is to look within the military, but never too far, and only superficially at the anomalies. Indeed, almost any discussion of military decision makers or history of a battle, campaign, or war, will discuss the decisions made at the top of the pyramid. It is also almost certain that even if they are so unique and granular as to discuss the way those decisions were shaped by exogenous factors, the description will be limited, superficial, and usually gives short shrift to the many actors who had a part in the overall action. Although there are exceptions to this rule, the grand theories of military decision making almost have to treat the complexity of their subject with a brush that simplifies and thus obscures many of these factors.³ Indeed, because of the sheer complexity of human interactive systems, it is simply not possible to parse out the many exogenous influences on each of the individuals described above, and the influences on all their influences, and so on.

In some ways then, this book describes chaos and complexity and how they truly manifest in decision making within and between complex adaptive systems, a military “butterfly effect.”⁴ More than that, however, it represents an attempt to fully recognize the agency, humanity, and responsibility of *all* actors within the military hierarchy. Military thinkers, historians, and others within the general sphere of military thought all too often pay only lip service to the individual soldier who has their boots in the mud, while discounting the meaning their experience—and the decisions made within it—has to the ultimate objective or endstate of the conflict. This study disagrees with that perspective. Even during the largest clashes in world history, battles with mil-

³ There is a separate genre of military history that focuses almost entirely on the lowest level; this is not addressed here as it rarely informs scholarship on military decision-making theories other than to provide examples and details in much the way used in this book.

⁴ The “Butterfly Effect” was first noted and discussed in terms of complexity, chaos, and sensitivity to initial conditions by Edward Lorenz in 1961. It has since become popular in many different forms. The basic idea—that complex, nonlinear systems are sensitive to initial conditions and it is nearly impossible to predict the systemic effects of even minor changes—remains both profound and counterintuitive. Grand theorists of warfare often understand this while not fully grasping its implications. See James Gleick, *Chaos: The Making of a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987), 9–31.

lions of participants, a single action or event precipitated by the lowliest of individual decisions might change the course of a war.

During the Battle of Kursk (1943)—by some metrics the largest single battle in history—a German pioneer was captured attempting to clear a Soviet minefield at 0200 the morning the battle began. Soviet forces began their artillery barrage to initiate the battle at 0220 the same morning, specifically in response to this event.⁵ Historians endlessly debate the import of specific events like this, and the author does not intend to take a position on this specific one. It is impossible to argue, however, that it did not have *some* effect on the outcome of the battle. It is impossible to rerun the event, and the counterfactual is equally impossible to fully develop. However, just as Edward Lorenz was unable to replicate the simulated weather events of the experiment that became the basis for the Butterfly Effect without identical initial conditions, so too are military historians and decision-making theorists unable to argue that any event would have ended the same had every soldier, sailor, or airman not been in the same place, making the same decisions.⁶ Thoughtful historians understand the extreme contingency of history, and it is enough here to recognize that an individual decision, made by an otherwise unimportant soldier whose name is lost to history, might have had an incalculable effect on one of the largest battles in world history that has also been characterized as “the turning point of World War II.”⁷

So What?

The question remains, however, what this approach actually *means*. Readers who have made it this far might find themselves thinking, “Fine, I believe you. Top-down direction rarely works the way historians or theorists claim it should. Most military actions are actually emergent behavior created by compromises that compile many different individual and organizational preferences into what looks like a singular action. The individual decisions that comprise this aggregate are generally self-interested, and more often than not made to accrue status or preserve reputation. So what?”

There are three ways to answer this question. First, knowledge and understanding are both an inherent good. This is not a noncontroversial statement;

⁵ Dennis Showalter, *Armor and Blood: The Battle of Kursk, the Turning Point of World War II* (New York: Random House, 2013), 78–79.

⁶ Gleick, *Chaos*, 9–31.

⁷ Showalter, *Armor and Blood*.

it has been subject to bitter philosophical debate since at least the time of Plato and Socrates.⁸ Although we will not enter the philosophical debate as to whether true belief or actual knowledge is superior here, the author's position is that it is objectively better to understand why a phenomenon exists than to simply believe it. The military culture, particularly because of its high-power distance and status dynamics, is one that often succumbs to true belief without knowledge or understanding. Even today, military leaders and thinkers speak favorably of Frederick the Great's "automatons."⁹ Indeed, a common idiom in the American military is "just push the 'I believe' button." This book seeks to do the opposite by attempting to understand a phenomenon and explain why this common way of thinking about how and why we got the way we are. The "I believe button" is not only wrong, but it has the potential to lead reformers and thinkers down the wrong, and possibly dangerous, path.

Second, the English polymath G. K. Chesterton proposed a thought experiment that has since become known as "Chesterton's Fence." In it, he describes a scenario where a reformer sees an object (a fence in this case) that does not appear to have any obvious use. Not seeing any clear reason for the fence, the reformer removes it; in many cases, however, this structure may have had a very good reason for being there. Chesterton's Fence argues not against the possibility of reform or change, but instead that those who seek to reform or change a social system should make every effort to understand why it is the way it is before making changes.¹⁰ Indeed, when we make changes without considering second- and third-order effects, we are very likely to make systems worse instead of solving the problems that we seek to address. Many have made such reform efforts in preceding years; this book represents yet another interpretation and framing that may aid in this process. The complexity of human social systems is beyond the understanding and control of any central actor; nonetheless, we will continue to seek to mold and develop them as best we can.¹¹ Understanding that we will continue to reform, develop, and change systems, it is imperative to avoid the mistakes of Chesterton's

⁸ Duncan Pritchard, John Turri, and J. Adam Carter, "The Value of Knowledge," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2022).

⁹ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 70.

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *The Thing* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1946).

¹¹ F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (1945): 519–30.

reformer when we do so. Is it important to deliberately create a system that understands the current environment and seeks to improve it by incentivizing the behavior it claims to desire? Based on the discussion found in previous chapters, the answer must be unequivocally yes. This book describes the current incentives in the military system with the hope that when the time comes, reformers and system designers will attempt to deliberately manage future incentives to achieve the outcome they assess to be needed.

Third, this book highlights a specific phenomenon that drives a great deal of military behavior: self-interested status and reputation maximizing. Understanding this phenomenon might be helpful to individuals who live within the military hierarchy, and thus they will be more effective members of the organization. This represents a net good; first, as a current member of the U.S. military the author has a vested interest in every single member of the hierarchy becoming better. In many ways, this means becoming better at navigating the byzantine structure and bureaucracy within which each one of us lives. If that has the ultimate effect of making the force more effective, then there can be no better explanation for why this way of seeing the world is important. Second, if our understanding of the basic motivations of military decision makers allows members of the U.S. military to know themselves and seek to be better, then this is also positive. The author is not a disinterested observer. Although they have tried to describe the phenomena outlined in this book with some dispassion, it is in their interest and that of every American for the military to be more effective in every regard. Hopefully, a more clear-eyed understanding of the incentives inherent to the military system will enable this.

Finally, and in this same vein, it is critically important for anyone who exists in the military or military-related fields of study to better understand the way military decisions, large and small, are actually made. To persist in believing the fantastical idea that some senior leader or their staff sits with a set of possible options, chooses the best one, and then that decision trickles down through the hierarchy until thousands of individuals act to achieve it, is to miss the trees for the forest. That description is certainly important, and it does provide many answers, but it also neglects significant context and description that often exercise influence on the way events play out.

The myth of military decision making is not that there are no decisions, but is instead that only the important people make them, or perhaps that only the ones made by important people are important. In fact, relevant,

often critical decisions are made by everyone in the hierarchy; and they are made not with some greater good or best military advice in mind. Instead, military personnel, regardless of position or rank, make decisions as everyone else does by consciously or unconsciously trying to maximize some sort of utility. Self-interest and personal preference, shaped by the system, circumstance, and human nature, are the most important factors in military decision making, and yet most treatments of it neglect this crucial point. To ignore this is and will continue to be the height of folly.

As Kenneth Waltz described in his genre-defining *Theory of International Politics*, there is an infinite amount of knowledge. There is thus also an infinite number of theories that humans might create to explain the different observations—collections of phenomena—that create this infinite corpus of knowledge.¹² He describes a theory as “a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity.”¹³ Theories help build such a picture in the mind of those who seek to understand; they collect phenomena and attempt to explain how and why they relate to each other and how they fit into a broader understanding of the world. If the theory of military decision making sketched here allows those who make decisions to better understand the way they are developed instead of simply working off Socrates’s “true belief,” then this book has been successful. No theory can describe all phenomena, and this book is no exception. There are many examples and counterexamples that might provide better explanation and reason for action in any specific scenario. However, on balance it seems clear that the basic idea of public choice theory, so often right in areas of human interaction, should also apply to the military, a social organization made of humans.

¹² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 4–7.

¹³ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 8.

Glossary

20-year cliff: Refers to the retirement system in the U.S. military through 2018, where significant benefits are conferred after 20 years of service.

accountability soup: A metaphor suggesting that diffused responsibility in bureaucracies hinders holding individuals accountable, potentially as a form of organizational reputation protection.

accoutrements: Accessories or additional items of dress or equipment (e.g., insignia for an aide-de-camp).

adaptive decision making: Model where choices adapt based on changing circumstances/feedback.

Admiralty (British): The government department formerly responsible for the command of the British Royal Navy.

advocacy for one's own mandate: Tendency for commanders to prioritize and argue for resources/missions within their own area of responsibility, potentially conflicting with higher strategy.

agency (individual): The capacity of individuals at all levels of the hierarchy to make choices and take actions that influence outcomes, often based on self-interest, challenging purely top-down or systemic explanations.

agency theory: Field focusing on the relationship between a principal (delegator) and an agent (performer), particularly conflicts of interest and information asymmetry.

agent (in principal-agent theory): The party to whom authority/tasks are delegated, acting for the principal but with potentially different interests/information.

aggregate/aggregation of actions: Collective outcome resulting from numerous individual decisions/actions; organizational action viewed as an aggregate.

airborne mafia: A term used to describe the influence of airborne-qualified officers within the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War era.

airpower advocates: Proponents emphasizing strategic airpower, sometimes promoting doctrine publicly for status/influence.

align incentives: The process of structuring rewards/penalties so an agent's self-interest aligns with the principal's goals.

altruism/extreme altruism: Selfless concern for others; acknowledged as real but rare, potentially still fitting within a broader view of rational self-interest (valuing others' well-being) but distinct from pure status/reputation maximization.

amalgamating (forces): Combining military units from different nations or Services under a single command.

analytic priority: Choosing which level of analysis (individual, system) provides the best understanding; book prioritizes the individual.

ancillary result: A secondary or less important outcome or consequence.

anthropomorphize: To attribute human characteristics to nonhuman entities like organizations.

antinepotism laws: Rules designed to prevent favoritism shown to relatives.

apportionment (of resources): Allocation of limited resources; potentially influenced by status/advocacy.

appropriateness (social): Conforming to accepted social standards or norms.

archetypes (of bureaucrats): Distinct models representing typical motivations/behaviors within a bureaucracy (Downs).

area of operations: A geographical area assigned to a commander for military operations.

argument by example/argumentation by example: Methodological approach using multiple illustrative cases rather than formal proof; acknowledged as potentially problematic but necessary.

Armistice Conference (Korea): Negotiations to end the Korean War hostilities.

ascribed status: Status assigned to an individual based on factors outside their control, such as family background, race, or gender.

attrition/attritional approach: Strategy aimed at defeating an enemy through gradual destruction of personnel/materiel.

automatons: Individuals acting mechanically; metaphorical description of unthinking followers.

average distribution of behavior: The typical pattern of actions in a group; book focuses on the average propensity for status/reputation seeking.

balance of power: Concept regarding distribution of power among states.

battle damage assessments (BDA): Analysis of attack effects; noted as often inflated for status/reputation.

behavioral decision theory: Approach focusing on how people *actually* make decisions, including biases/heuristics.

bias for offensive action: An ingrained preference for attacking, sometimes irrespective of circumstances.

bifurcation (of ranks): The fundamental division between officer and enlisted personnel.

black box (in analysis): Treating an entity (like the military) as opaque, ignoring internal workings. Critiqued as overly simplistic.

Bloomington School (of Public Choice): School associated with Vincent and Elinor Ostrom, noted for interdisciplinary approach.

body count: The number of enemy soldiers killed in battle, used as a controversial metric of success during the Vietnam War.

bottom-up process: Dynamic where outcomes are shaped significantly by actions/decisions at lower levels. Contrasted with top-down.

bounded rationality: Concept (Herbert Simon) that decision-making is rational but limited by cognitive capacity, information, and time, leading to “satisficing.”

branch insignia/qualification badges/community insignia: Uniform additions denoting specialty/skills/affiliation, acting as status markers.

budget maximization (bureaucratic goal theory): Theory (William Niskanen) that bureaucrats aim to maximize agency budgets; critiqued as primary military motivator.

budget split (inter-Service): Division of defense funds among Services, potentially reflecting negotiation rather than strategy.

bureau: An organization characterized by large size, dependence of most members on it for income, merit-based personnel systems, and outputs not evaluated in an external market. (Anthony Downs)

bureaucracy: System of administration with hierarchy, rules, specialization; defined via Max Weber/Anthony Downs criteria.

bureaucracy theory: The systematic study of the structure, functioning, and behavior of bureaucracies.

bureaucratic efficiency: Efficiency of internal administrative processes, not necessarily overall effectiveness.

bureaucratic knife fighting: Intense, often covert, political struggles within bureaucracies.

bureaucratic politics model: Analysis of decisions as outcomes of bargaining among bureaucratic actors (Graham Allison’s Model 3).

bureaucrat: Individual working within a bureau under specific conditions; used descriptively. (Anthony Downs)

busyness (as status symbol): Phenomenon where being overworked is perceived as a sign of importance.

butterfly effect (metaphorical application): Idea that small individual actions can have large, unpredictable systemic consequences.

Byzantine (complexity): Characterized by excessive complexity and intricate procedures.

campaigns/operations: Planned sequences of military actions aimed at operational/strategic objectives.

career timing/career assignments: Importance of luck and specific job sequences for promotion.

cascade of principal-agent relationships: Concept of hierarchy as multiple interlocking principal-agent dyads at every level.

causal story: An explanation linking cause and effect.

cavalry arm (status implications): Referring to Douglas Haig's defense of the cavalry, illustrating protection of branch status.

centralization-decentralization dichotomy: Tension between concentrating versus distributing decision authority.

chain of command: The formal hierarchical structure of authority and communication within the military.

Chesterton's fence (principle of cautious reform): Idea that existing structures should not be removed without understanding their original purpose to avoid unintended consequences.

cherry picking (methodological concern): Selectively choosing evidence to support a position; acknowledged risk.

chief of the general staff: Head of the army general staff in some systems (e.g., German).

citizen soldiers: Noncareer military members, potentially less influenced by internal status dynamics.

civil defense: Measures to protect civilians from attack.

civil-military relations: Study of military-society/government relationship.

class systems: Societal stratification based on social/economic status.

clearing operation: Military mission to remove enemy forces from an area.

close hold (information): Tightly restricting information access.

closed systems (in analysis): Viewing organizations as self-contained; critiqued as unrealistic.

cloud of examples (methodological approach): Presenting numerous diverse examples to illustrate a phenomenon.

coerced versus conferred status: Distinction based on status yielded due to fear (dominance) versus given freely due to respect (prestige/virtue).

cognate fields: Related academic disciplines.

cognitive load (effect of low status): Awareness of subordinate status potentially impairing higher mental functions.

cognitive neuroscience: Field studying biological basis of cognition.

cognitively available options: (Herbert Simon) Limited set of alternatives considered under bounded rationality.

cognitive overmatch: Aiming for intellectual superiority over adversaries.

coherence/coherent (strategy): Logical consistency; argued lacking in actual grand strategy.

cohesion/small group cohesion: Social bonds within primary groups; critical combat motivator.

collective action problem/logic of collective action: Difficulty organizing large groups for common benefit due to individual disincentives (Mancur Olson).

collective actors: Groups treated as single decision-makers.

collective good/collective interest: Overall group/national welfare, potentially undermined by self-interest.

Combat Action Badge/Combat Infantryman Badge/Combat Action Ribbon: U.S. military awards signifying combat participation; sought as visible status symbols.

command and control (C2): Exercise of authority/direction over forces.

command collectives: Modern command structures involving distributed decision-making (Anthony King).

community status competition: Rivalry between different military units or specialties.

comparative models: Research comparing different cases/systems.

competence (as status source): Demonstrated skill conferring status.

competitive risk seeking/status-driven risk taking: Tendency (especially young males) to take risks to compete for status.

complex adaptive systems: Systems (like military organizations) with interacting components whose aggregate behavior is emergent and adaptive.

complexity (of administrative tasks): Secondary bureaucratic characteristic.

components (subordinate): Major Service elements under Joint theater command.

confabulation: Unconscious creation of plausible but false explanations/narratives for actions or history. Argued commonly regarding military decisions/strategy.

confirmation bias: Tendency to favor information confirming existing beliefs.

conflation: Merging distinct concepts inappropriately.

conspicuous consumption (Thorstein Veblen): Displaying wealth for status; analogous to “busyness.”

contingency of history: View that outcomes depend heavily on specific events/choices.

contingency theory: Management theory that optimal structure depends on situational factors.

conventional war (versus counterinsurgency): Standard state-on-state warfare versus fighting insurgents.

co-option: The process of absorbing new members into a select group, often to maintain control or influence.

corporate ambience: Organizational atmosphere influencing practice.

corpus of knowledge: Entire body of knowledge in a field.

correlation versus causation: Distinction between relationship and cause-effect.

coterie: Small exclusive group.

cover your ass (CYA): Taking actions primarily to protect oneself from blame or criticism, often at the expense of effectiveness or ethical considerations.

cult of the offensive (French World War I): Doctrine emphasizing offensive action, linked to status of ideas.

cults of personality: Excessive admiration for leaders.

cultural milieu: Specific social/cultural environment influencing behavior.

cumulative advantage (Matthew Effect): The tendency for initial advantages in status or resources to accumulate over time, leading to increasing disparities.

customs and courtesies: Military traditions reinforcing hierarchy/status.

cybernetic theory/model: Approach modeling systems based on feedback loops (John R. Boyd).

cyclical inspections: Regular evaluations potentially distorting unit focus toward metrics over readiness.

Dardanelles campaign/Gallipoli campaign: World War I Allied operation cited as driven by status seeking leading to failure.

data points (methodological term): Examples illustrating an argument.

decimation: The practice of killing 1 in every 10 soldiers in a unit as punishment, referenced in the context of historical military discipline.

defense apparatus/defense establishment: Collective organizations involved in national defense.

defensive realism: International relations theory emphasizing systemic structure and state survival.

deference: Yielding or showing respect, often based on status.

definitional rigor: Strict precision in defining terms.

delegate authority: Entrusting tasks to an agent; creates principal-agent relationship.

dependent variable: Research outcome variable influenced by independent variable.

derivative work (of history): Work based on secondary sources.

descriptive (versus normative/predictive): Aiming to explain “what is” rather than prescribe “should be” or predict “will be.” (Book’s stance).

Desert One (Operation Eagle Claw): The failed 1980 mission to rescue American hostages in Iran, cited as a potential example of military rent-seeking.

desires about desires (Harry Frankfurt): Human capacity to form preferences about one’s own motivations.

determinism/deterministic theory: View that events are predetermined by preceding causes.

deterrence theory: Cold War theories on preventing adversary action via threats/reputation.

diagnostic (behavior): Actions seen as revealing character; negative actions often more diagnostic.

different spansks for different ranks: The perception that military punishment varies based on rank, potentially undermining trust and morale.

diffusion: Spread of ideas/practices between groups.

doctrine (written versus practiced): Distinction between official published principles and actual operational behavior, influenced by culture/incentives.

dominance (status): Achieving status through force, intimidation, or the display of superior strength or power.

dominant indicator: A single, quantifiable metric used to assess success or progress, often with unintended consequences for organizational behavior.

Domino Theory: Cold War theory justifying Vietnam intervention.

drum and trumpet school (of history): Traditional military history focusing on battles/leaders.

Dunbar's number: Theoretical cognitive limit on stable social relationships (~150).

dyadic relationship: Interaction involving two parties (basic principal-agent unit).

earned status: Status achieved through individual effort, skill, or accomplishment.

echelon: Level or rank within a hierarchy.

edifice (of theory): A complex system of beliefs.

emergent behavior: Behavior that arises from the interactions of individual components within a system, often in unpredictable ways. Applied to strategy/operations.

empirical research: Research based on observation/evidence.

enclave strategy: A military strategy focused on holding and defending key areas or enclaves, often contrasted with more expansive or offensive approaches (Vietnam).

endemic faction fighting: Persistent internal conflict within an organization.

espoused values: Stated beliefs, may differ from practice.

ethical fading: The process by which ethical considerations are gradually diminished or ignored in decision-making, potentially linked to high status.

Europe first strategy: Allied World War II grand strategy prioritizing Germany's defeat.

evolutionary hard wiring/evolutionary origin/evolved: Innate behavioral tendencies shaped by natural selection (argued for status-seeking).

exchange ratio (kill ratio): A metric used to compare the number of enemy casualties to friendly casualties, often used in conjunction with body counts (Vietnam).

executive processes (cognitive): Higher mental functions potentially impaired by status awareness.

existential conflicts/threats: Wars threatening national survival; self-interest argued to persist.

exogenous factors: Influences from outside the system being analyzed.

explanatory (power): A theory's ability to make sense of phenomena.

ex post explanation: Explaining events after they occur.

extrapolating: Extending findings to other situations.

extreme altruism: Rare acts of complete selflessness.

face saving: Actions to avoid humiliation or preserve prestige.

facial dominance: Physical characteristics of the face that are perceived as dominant and may influence status perceptions.

fallacy: Mistaken belief based on unsound argument.

false positives (in analysis): Incorrectly identifying a pattern or cause.

falsifiability/unfalsifiability: Whether a theory can be potentially disproven; acknowledged challenge for motivational theories.

feedback loop: Cyclical process where output influences input.

feudal systems: Medieval social structures; mentioned regarding ascribed status.

fighter mafia: Informal term for group of Air Force officers advocating fighter procurement changes during Vietnam era.

first principles: Fundamental assumptions of a theory.

First Sea Lord: Professional head of British Royal Navy.

flagship: Ship carrying fleet commander.

forced innovation: Pressure on leaders to implement change for status/reputation.

formal communications networks: Official channels for information flow.

formal impersonality: Bureaucratic trait of applying rules uniformly.

formal modeling: Using mathematical/logical structures to represent theories.

formal rules: Explicit organizational regulations.

formal status indicators: Official symbols of rank/achievement (insignia, awards).

fortifications: Defensive structures; status implications discussed.

fragging: The deliberate killing or attempted killing of a superior officer by a subordinate, often using a fragmentation grenade (Vietnam).

framing device: Conceptual structure for presentation.

framing effects: Influence of presentation on choice.

fundamental human desire: Innate drive (status argued as one).

game theoretic modeling: Using mathematical "games" to analyze strategic interaction.

garbage can theory: A model of organizational decision-making positing that decisions are not always rational or based on clear goals, but emerging from a confluence of problems, solutions, participants, and opportunities.

garrison environment: Noncombat military setting.

generalissimo: Supreme commander of combined forces (Ferdinand Foch).

glossolalia/techno-speak: Obscure technical jargon potentially used to obfuscate or impress.

golden thread of purpose: A phrase describing the traditional, idealized view of military operations as a cascading set of tasks emanating seamlessly from high-level decisions and intentions; contrasted with principal-agent reality.

Goldwater-Nichols Act (1986): U.S. defense reorganization law aimed at jointness, potentially creating new principal-agent issues between Service/operational chains.

Grandmaisonites: French military theorists who advocated for offensive action at all costs before World War I.

grand narrative(s): Overarching historical stories, often simplifying or confabulating reality.

grand strategic approaches/grand strategy: Highest level statecraft coordinating national power; argued as often confabulatory/emergent.

grand theory/grand theories of bureaucracy: Broad theories aiming for wide applicability; questioned for bureaucracy.

great captains (concept in military history): Traditional focus on exceptionally skilled commanders.

Great Society: Lyndon B. Johnson's 1960s domestic programs expanding bureaucracy.

hard sciences versus social sciences: Categorization based on perceived determinism/precision.

health impacts (of status hierarchy): Negative outcomes linked to lower status (status syndrome).

hearts and minds: Strategy aiming to win civilian support.

hero city: Location held for prestige beyond military value (e.g., Ypres).

heuristics/heuristic style: Mental shortcuts or simplified models used for understanding/decision-making; book applies public choice as heuristic.

hierarchy/hierarchical structure: Organizational ranking by authority/status; defining military/bureaucratic characteristic.

hierarchy of motivations: Implicit idea that individuals prioritize among various potential drives.

hierometer theory: A social psychology theory that describes how individuals automatically assess and rank others in terms of social status.

high-potential officers: Individuals identified early for leadership, potentially benefiting from Matthew effect.

honor (as motivator): Sense of integrity, standing, adherence to code; intertwined with status/reputation. Used broadly in chapter 6 regarding international relations.

homo economicus: Theoretical purely rational, utility-maximizing individual.

human agency: Capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices.

humiliation: Severe embarrassment/loss of dignity associated with status loss.

hypersensitive (to status)/status hypersensitivity: Unusually attuned to status differences; heightened awareness and argued characteristic of military personnel.

hypothesis/hypothesis testing: Specific, testable proposition; formal scientific evaluation method (contrasted with book's approach).

"I believe" button (idiom for uncritical acceptance): Metaphor for accepting ideas based on authority without understanding.

ideal type (Weberian): Conceptual benchmark representing pure features of a phenomenon (e.g., bureaucracy).

image management/cultivation of image: Deliberate efforts to shape public perception.

immutable characteristics: Unchangeable personal traits influencing ascribed status.

impersonality of operations: Bureaucratic trait of applying rules uniformly.

implications (of the theory): Consequences or conclusions drawn from the book's arguments.

incentives: Factors motivating behavior; military incentives argued to favor status/reputation.

independent variable: Research variable presumed to influence dependent variable.

informal hierarchies/informal status indicators: Social rankings/cues outside formal structures.

information asymmetry: A situation in which different actors have unequal access to information, a key factor in the principal-agent problem.

information environment (transparency): Overall context of information flow; increasing transparency challenges secrecy.

information problems: Difficulties from incomplete, asymmetric, or distorted information.

information winnowing: Filtering/reduction of information moving up hierarchy.

in-group-out-group distinctions: Cognitive categorization into "us" versus "them," often with in-group favoritism.

innate preference: Natural tendency/predisposition.

innovation (as status-seeking): Pursuing novelty, sometimes performatively, for career advancement/reputation.

inspections (focus on): Formal evaluations potentially distorting unit priorities.

institutionalized inequality: The inherent inequality built into the military's hierarchical structure.

instrumental approach (to bureaucracy): Analyzing roles/actions based on function/utility (Anthony Downs's method).

intellectual milieu: Prevailing climate of ideas.

intellectual progenitor: Originator of an idea/field (Max Weber for bureaucracy).

intensive personal loyalty: Strong allegiance, especially higher ranks; bureaucratic trait.

interdisciplinary: Drawing from multiple academic fields.

inter-Service conflict/rivalries/inter-Service squabbling: Competition between military branches driven by self-interest (status, resources, roles).

internal structure (of organization): Arrangement of roles/rules/relationships.

international relations: Academic field studying interactions between states/actors.

intrinsic motivation: Performing activity for inherent satisfaction.

izzat: An Urdu word meaning honor, reputation, or prestige, used to illustrate the motivations of Indian soldiers during World War I.

Joint doctrine/Joint viewpoint: Principles guiding multi-Service operations; perspective prioritizing Joint goals over Service interests.

kleptocracies: Governments characterized by systemic corruption for personal enrichment.

knowledge versus true belief: Philosophical distinction emphasizing justified understanding over mere acceptance.

large-n style analysis: Quantitative research using many cases.

lateral entry (impossibility of): Entering mid-career; precluded in military.

latitude (in interpretation/action): Degree of discretion allowed/taken by subordinates.

levels of war (strategic, operational, tactical): Framework categorizing military activity by scope/objective.

liberal theories (international relations): International relations theories emphasizing individual/domestic factors over systemic structure.

logrolling: Vote trading among politicians for mutual benefit.

loss aversion: Cognitive bias where losses feel more impactful than equivalent gains; linked to risk aversion/reputation protection.

loyalty (as bureaucratic goal/motivation): Faithfulness, potentially conflicting within hierarchy.

macroeconomic versus microeconomic approach/viewpoint: Macro focuses on large systems; micro focuses on individual actors; book advocates micro.

main force units (Vietnam): Organized conventional enemy units, prioritized by U.S. forces.

mal-obedience: Disobedience or noncompliance with orders, often motivated by a belief that alternative actions are more effective or ethical.

management control theory: Using feedback systems to ensure adherence to plans.

maneuverist school/maneuver warfare: Approach emphasizing speed, surprise, psychology, and decentralization over attrition.

manifestly strategic: Clearly related to high-level objectives.

materiel/materiel superiority: Military equipment/supplies; advantage from having more/better equipment.

Matthew effect: See cumulative advantage.

merit/meritocracy: Principle/system where advancement is based on ability/achievement. Potentially undermined by status dynamics.

meta reputation management: Actions (like editing diaries) aimed at shaping future perception of reputation.

method-driven (research): Research guided primarily by established methodologies.

methodological rigor: Strictness in research methods.

methodological shibboleths: Accepted but potentially unexamined methods/beliefs in a field.

micro perspective: Analysis focusing on individual actors (see advocated approach).

military art: Skillful conduct of military operations.

military expediency: Actions justified by immediate military needs.

military history: Academic field studying past warfare.

military managerialism: Perspective seeing modern command as collective management.

military necessity (versus prestige/status): Justifying actions based on operational requirements versus symbolic value.

military professionalism (study of): Examination of military values/ethics/standards.

military science: Systematic study of warfare.

military sociology: Subfield studying military as social organization.

military-industrial-congressional complex: Term describing the relationship between the military, the defense industry, and legislative interests.

mirror-image assumption: Believing the enemy thinks similarly.

mixed-method approach: Research combining quantitative and qualitative techniques.

motivation/motivations (conscious versus unconscious): Acknowledging both deliberate and underlying drives (like status-seeking).

motivated reasoning: Reasoning skewed toward desired conclusions.

muddling through: Decision-making model (Charles Lindblom) emphasizing incremental adjustments.

multivariate explanation/multivariate set of conditions: Recognizing multiple contributing factors.

mutually assured destruction (MAD): Cold War nuclear deterrence doctrine.

myth of military decision making: The book's central thesis: the common portrayal of military operations as resulting from rational, top-down decisions executing a clear "golden thread of purpose" is a flawed simplification (myth/confabulation) that ignores the crucial role of bottom-up influences, individual self-interest (status/reputation seeking), principal-agent problems, and emergent complexity.

narrative (personal versus organizational): The story told about events, shaped for reputation.

narrative management: Controlling the story told about events.

national interest (defined, critiqued): A country's purported goals; argued as subjective, malleable, and often secondary to self-interest.

national prestige: Respect/influence nation holds internationally; cited as strategic motivator.

nature versus nurture: Debate on relative influence of heredity versus environment.

negotiated environment (Robert Posen): Outcome where organizations establish stable relationships based on compromise.

New Deal: Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1930s programs expanding bureaucracy.

new institutionalism: Approach emphasizing role of institutions in shaping behavior.

nihilism: Belief values are baseless; rejected implication.

noblesse oblige: Concept of responsibility accompanying privilege.

nonmaterial benefits (status, prestige, etc.): Intangible rewards motivating individuals beyond pay.

normative (versus descriptive/predictive): Prescribing "should be" versus explaining "is"; book avoids normative stance.

normal distribution: Statistical bell curve; average behavior versus outliers.

Occam's razor: Principle favoring simpler explanations; status/reputation argued as Occam's razor for much military behavior.

offensive action (bias for): Ingrained preference for attacking.

OODA loop (observe-orient-decide-act): John Boyd's decision-making cycle model emphasizing speed and adaptation.

operational level of war: Level linking strategy and tactics via campaigns/operations, realm of theater commanders.

operative beliefs: Beliefs actually guiding behavior (Robert Jervis).

optimal course of action/optimal strategy: Theoretically best plan; questioned as achievable or primary goal.

order of battle (Vietnam controversy): Dispute over estimated enemy force size.

organization theory: Broad interdisciplinary field studying organizations.

organizational culture: Shared assumptions, values, norms influencing behavior.

organizational effects (versus individual): Impacts on the organization.

organizational independence: Service branch's desire for autonomy.

organizational politics: Internal power struggles/maneuvering.

organizational process model (Graham Allison): Model 2 explaining actions as outputs of routines/standard operating procedures.

organizational rational choice model: Treating organizations as unified rational actors; critiqued.

organizational reputation: Collective beliefs about an organization's past performance/future behavior.

organizational status: Comparative ranking of an organization based on esteem/influence.

other-regarding functions: Motivations focused on others' welfare.

outcome-based remuneration: Pay tied to results; largely absent in military.

palace intrigue: High-level infighting/scheming.

Papers on Non-Market Decision Making: Original name of journal *Public Choice*.

parallel fashion versus sequential fashion (research progress): Research proceeding independently versus building on prior work.

paramilitary organization: Group structured like military but outside official forces (Wagner Group).

parochial (interests)/parochial contributions: Focused on narrow group benefits; actions benefiting own group over collective.

parsimony/parsimonious: Principle favoring simplicity in explanation; economical in explanation.

parvenu: Newly wealthy/status person perceived as lacking refinement.

path dependence: Past choices constraining future options (related to Matthew effect).

path of least resistance: Easiest course of action; status/reputation potentially this path.

patronage (military context): Support from senior to junior, influenced by reputation.

Peers Inquiry: U.S. Army investigation into My Lai, Vietnam War.

Pentagon Papers: Leaked classified Department of Defense study on Vietnam.

personality conflicts: Interpersonal antagonism, potentially masking status competition.

personality traits: Enduring patterns of thought, feeling, behavior.

policy (versus strategy): Guiding principles/rules versus plan for resource use; often intertwined.

policy recommendations: Specific suggestions for action; explicitly avoided by book.

political economy: Field studying interaction of politics and economics.

politically aware decision making: Model incorporating political factors/bargaining.

polymath: Person with wide-ranging knowledge.

positive political theory: Approach using formal methods for explanatory theories of politics (Rochester School).

positivist activity (regarding grand strategy)/positivist social theory: Viewing phenomena as objective and scientifically determinable; view that social phenomena can be studied empirically like natural sciences (book questions strict positivism here).

post hoc/post-hoc caricatures/post-hoc explanations: After the event; simplified critical portrayals created after; explanations created after (confabulation).

posterity: Future generations.

posturing (political): Behaving to impress or mislead, often for future gain.

power (as bureaucratic goal): One of Downs's motivations; linked to rank in military.

power distance (Geert Hofstede's cultural dimension): Extent less powerful members accept power inequality. Militaries cited as high power distance.

predecessor (comparison with): Person who previously held a position; comparing favorably is status tactic.

predictive (versus normative versus descriptive): Aiming to forecast future; book avoids predictive claims.

preferential access: Priority access to resources, often linked to status.

preponderance (of motivation): Being greater in importance; status/reputation argued as preponderance motivator.

prescribe (versus describe): Recommend action (normative) versus explain (descriptive).

prestige (status): Achieving status through the sharing of expertise, knowledge, or skill. Used broadly as high standing/respect.

prestige patterns (Morris Janowitz): Changing bases of prestige at different career stages; professional military education aims to shape these.

prestige targets/prestige weapons: Targets attacked or weapons acquired primarily for symbolic value or status, not necessarily military effectiveness.

prestige trap: A situation where a focus on the symbolic value of an objective leads to irrational decision-making and potentially disastrous consequences.

primary group/small group cohesion: Bonds within immediate units (squads, etc.); critical combat motivator linked to internal status/reputation.

primary source materials/primary sources: Contemporary, firsthand accounts or evidence.

principal (in principal-agent theory): The individual or party who delegates authority or tasks to an agent, expecting the agent to act in the principal's interest.

principal-agent problem: The potential for conflict between the interests of a principal and the interests of an agent who is supposed to be acting on their behalf, driven by differing goals and information asymmetry. Argued to exist in cascade throughout military hierarchies.

principled agents: Workers in bureaucracies who are motivated by principles rather than self-interest; explained within book's framework potentially via status/reputation or valuing principles.

privileging one's principles (Henry Roberts): Concept that individuals can rationally choose to act based on values, deriving utility from the act itself.

professional currency: Metaphor suggesting status/reputation function as valuable assets within a profession.

professional military education (PME): Formal military schooling intended to develop personnel and socialize them into appropriate values/prestige patterns.

promotion boards/screening boards: Committees reviewing personnel for advancement/assignments.

propensity to serve (recruiting metric): Measure of likelihood of youth considering military service, influenced by perceptions of status/benefits.

public choice theory: An approach applying economic reasoning (especially assumptions of self-interest and utility maximization within bounded rationality) to analyze nonmarket decision-making, particularly in politics and government bureaucracy. Includes various schools (Virginia, Rochester, Bloomington) (core interpretive framework).

public goods: Goods that are nonexcludable and nonrivalrous, subject to collective action problems.

purposive behavior: Actions undertaken intentionally to achieve a specific goal.

quantitative approach/quantitative methods: Research methodology relying on numerical data, statistical analysis, and measurement.

quid pro quo trade: An exchange where something is given for something else.

rally around the flag effect: Increased short-run popular support of the president during periods of international crisis or war.

rational actor decision-making model/rational actor model: Model treating organizations/states as unified entities making optimal choices (Graham Allison's Model 1); critiqued.

rational choice/rational choice theory: Framework assuming individuals make calculated decisions to maximize utility given preferences/constraints. Foundational but critiqued for oversimplification.

rationalization/rationalizing animal: Creating plausible justifications for behavior, often post hoc or motivated; Robert Heinlein's term suggesting humans prioritize justification over pure reason.

reflexive secrecy: Automatic tendency of military organizations to conceal information, often for reputation protection even without genuine security needs.

regimental systems: Military structure (UK/Commonwealth) with strong unit identity/loyalty/status dynamics.

regulatory capture: Regulatory agency advancing interests of industry it regulates. Form of rent-seeking.

rent-seeking: Expending resources to gain advantages via political/regulatory manipulation rather than production. Seeking privileges, subsidies, monopolies (core concept elaborated).

reputation: Defined as beliefs about past actions and expectations of future perfor-

mance based on perceived quality (how good people think you are), distinct from status (how important people think you are) but closely intertwined. Managed to avoid loss and enable cooperation. A key motivator (central concept elaborated).

reputation management: Actions taken by individuals and organizations to protect or enhance their standing, perception, and trustworthiness in the eyes of relevant audiences.

revealed preferences (methodological argument): Inferring underlying motivations or preferences from observed actions, rather than relying solely on stated intentions, acknowledging potential for confabulation.

revolt of the admirals: A dispute between the U.S. Navy and the Harry Truman administration over defense policy and budget priorities (1949); cited as inter-Service status conflict.

risk aversion: Preference for avoiding uncertainty; linked to protecting reputation/status.

roadmaps (career): Prescribed job sequences related to “ticket punching.”

Rochester School (of Public Choice): School emphasizing formal methods (game theory, stats).

rule breaking (correlation with high status): Tendency for high-status individuals potentially to violate norms more readily.

satisficing: Choosing “good enough” options rather than optimal ones, due to bounded rationality or compromise.

second- and third-order effects: Indirect/delayed consequences; important in reforms (Chesterton’s fence).

secondary sources: Works written after events, analyzing primary/other secondary sources.

security (as bureaucratic goal): One of Anthony Downs’s motivations; argued less relevant in military.

security studies: Academic field concerning security threats, strategy, etc.

selection effects: Phenomenon where individuals self-select into groups, potentially biasing group characteristics (e.g., military attracting status-sensitive people).

selective interpretation: Understanding/applying directives biased by own interests/preferences. Key principal-agent behavior.

self-deception: Misleading oneself about true motives/reality.

self-interest: Acting according to one’s own perceived goals/preferences; core public choice assumption, often manifesting as status/reputation seeking in military (central concept).

self-preservation: Instinctive drive to protect oneself; balanced against/overridden by status/reputation concerns.

self-referential: Focused on or referring to oneself.

self-reinforcing (cycle): Process where effect strengthens cause.

self-sacrificing patriotism: Idealized view of military motivation.

self-serving: Acting primarily for own interests.

self-serving quantitative metrics: Choosing/emphasizing numerical measures portraying own performance favorably, potentially distorting reality.

SERE/Ranger/Jump/Dive schools: Difficult military courses conferring high-status qualifications/badges.

Service chain of command (versus operational): Hierarchy within specific Service, potentially manipulated against Joint operational chain under Goldwater-Nichols.

Service equities/Service primacy: Specific interests of a military branch; state of a Service being dominant.

shibboleth: Custom/belief distinguishing a group, often accepted uncritically.

shirk/subvert/steal: Agent behaviors counter to principal's interest in basic principal-agent models.

short-term thinking: Prioritizing immediate outcomes, potentially driven by rotation cycles.

shorthand: Abbreviated way of conveying info; reputation as shorthand for competence.

sine qua non: Essential condition or indispensable requirement.

situational attributes: Characteristics of a specific context.

situational dynamics: Factors in specific environment influencing behavior.

situational imperatives: Demands arising from specific circumstances.

size maximization (bureaucratic goal theory): Theory that bureaucrats aim to increase agency size; critiqued as primary military motivator.

Smith versus Smith controversy: The controversy surrounding the relief of Army MajGen Ralph Smith by Marine LtGen Holland Smith during WWII (Saipan), highlighting inter-Service rivalries and status competition.

social choice theory: Framework examining aggregation of individual preferences into collective decisions.

social climbing: Deliberate efforts to improve social status.

social construction: Idea that realities (like aspects of status) are shaped by collective beliefs/interactions.

social control: Group mechanisms regulating member behavior; reputation/gossip key informal mechanisms.

social Darwinism: Applying "survival of fittest" to societies/nations; influential pre-World War I ideology justifying competition/hierarchy.

social esteem/social honor/social respect: Components contributing to status, reflecting value/admiration/deference from others.

social functions (influence on organizations): Societal purposes of an organization, influencing its structure/behavior.

social hierarchy: Ranking of individuals/groups based on status, power, etc.

social psychology: Study of social influences on individual thoughts/feelings/behaviors.

social status/status: Comparative social ranking based on esteem, honor, respect; fundamental human drive linked to resource access; pursued via dominance, prestige, virtue pathways. Argued primary utility maximized by military personnel (central concept).

social status sensitivity: Degree individuals are attuned to/affected by status differences; argued heightened in military.

socially deviant: Behaving in a way that significantly violates group norms.

socialization: Process of learning/internalizing group norms/values.

stakeholders: Individuals/groups with interest in an outcome.

standing: Position/reputation relative to others.

state secrets privilege: Government legal right to withhold info for national security, potentially misused (*United States versus Reynolds*, 1953).

statistical correlation: Measured relationship between variables.

status blowback: Negative consequences resulting from high status, such as increased scrutiny and the tendency to become complacent.

status competition: Universal human need for higher rank within social hierarchies.

status conflict: Rivalry stemming from competition over rank/standing.

status dissatisfaction (international relations): Nation's unhappiness with international rank, potential conflict cause (Jonathan Renshon).

status hypersensitivity: Heightened awareness and sensitivity to social status differences, argued to be a characteristic of military personnel.

status organizing: The interactive process through which individuals negotiate and establish status hierarchies.

status symbols (visible): Objects, traits, behaviors signifying social standing (medals, badges, etc.).

status syndrome: The negative impact of low social status on health and well-being (Michael Marmot).

stipulating: Accepting something as true without proof in context.

stolen valor: The act of falsely claiming military service or awards, used to illustrate the extreme pursuit of status symbols.

strategic bombing/Strategic Bombing Survey: Air campaigns against enemy capacity/will; post-World War II analysis of bombing effects.

strategic effects: Outcomes impacting overall national/coalition objectives.

strategic level (of war): Highest level concerned with national objectives and resource coordination.

strategic utility: Long-term importance of objective for achieving national goals.

strategy (defined, critiqued): Plan coordinating national power instruments; critiqued as often ill-defined, emergent, or confabulatory.

street-level bureaucracy theory: Focuses on frontline public workers exercising discretion.

structural realism/systemic realism: International relations theories emphasizing international system structure as primary driver of state behavior.

structuration theory: Sociological theory emphasizing interplay between agency and structure.

Study on Military Professionalism (U.S. Army): A study conducted after the My Lai Massacre, which identified problems with selfish behavior and a focus on pleasing superiors within the Army.

suboptimal action: Actions resulting in less favorable outcomes than possible.

subordinate components: Major Service elements under Joint theater command.

sunk cost fallacy: Continuing failing course of action due to past investment; related to prestige trap.

symbolic strategic point: Location valued more for prestige/symbolism than military utility.

systemic (theories)/systemic ideas: Approaches focusing on overall system properties; ideas derived from such theories.

systemic incentives: Organizational structures/processes encouraging certain behaviors.

systematically distorted information: Information consistently biased/inaccurate as it flows through hierarchy.

systems thinking: Analysis focusing on interrelationships within systems.

tabula rasa: Blank slate; used regarding interpretation of John Boyd's ideas.

tacit truces: Unofficial cessations of hostilities between frontline units based on mutual self-interest.

tactical level (of war): Level concerned with specific battles/engagements; highest direct combat risk.

territorial conquest: Seizing territory; military incentive cited by Dan Altman and Melissa Lee.

thankless tasks: Difficult jobs without reward; potentially motivated by status/reputation.

theater commander/theater headquarters: Senior commander for geographic area; their headquarters.

theoretical underpinning: Core concepts founding an argument.

theory (Kenneth Waltz's definition): Mental picture/explanatory model of a domain.

theory of causation: Explanation of cause/effect relationship.

theory of victory: Underlying logic explaining how strategy leads to success.

theory testing (work): Research focused on formally proving/disproving hypothesis.

ticket punching: The practice of pursuing specific assignments or qualifications primarily for career advancement rather than genuine interest or skill development.

top-down (decision models/policy making): Idealized view of decisions flowing rationally from highest levels; book critiques this, emphasizes bottom-up.

trade-offs: Sacrificing one benefit for another; inherent in system design/decisions.

trajectory (career): Path of professional career, influenced by early assignments/status.

trees for the forest (missing the): Focusing on overarching narratives while ignoring crucial individual details/agency; critique of simplified models.

tribal creatures: Referring to inherent human tendency to form cohesive social groups (tribes).

Triple Entente: Pre-World War I alliance (Britain, France, Russia).

trivial short-term objectives (preoccupation with): Focusing on minor tasks.

true belief (versus knowledge): Accepting something as true without full understanding; contrasted with deeper knowledge.

unfalsifiability: Impossibility of proving theory wrong; challenge for motivational theories.

unification (of U.S. Services): Post-World War II process integrating Services under the Department of Defense; cited as major inter-Service status battle.

unitary actor model (critiqued): Treating state/organization as single rational decision-maker; critiqued as unrealistic.

up or out: A personnel system in which individuals must be promoted within a certain timeframe or leave the organization, common in the U.S. military.

upward communication: Flow of information up hierarchy.

utility/utility function/utility maximization: Usefulness/satisfaction; theoretical representation of preferences; seeking maximum personal benefit given constraints (core concepts).

valor (decisions): Actions involving great courage; potentially motivated beyond simple self-interest.

value judgment: Assessment based on personal standards; book often aims for description over normative judgment.

vertical code switching: Alternating between different communication styles and behaviors depending on one's position in a hierarchy, a challenge faced by individuals in the middle of bureaucratic structures.

vested interest: Personal stake in an outcome.

victory has 100 fathers . . . (axiom): Saying implying success has many claimants, failure often orphaned.

Virginia School (of Public Choice): Founding school (James Buchanan and Gor-

don Tullock), emphasizing constitutional economics, political processes, government failure.

virtue (status): Achieving status through displays of duty, obedience, and morality.

Considered subset of prestige pathway.

visible status indicators: Tangible symbols of status (medals, badges, etc.).

vital interests: National interests deemed essential; argued as subjective/malleable.

war aims: Specific objectives for fighting a war; often shift.

war of choice: Conflict entered voluntarily, not out of direct necessity.

Warfighting: Foundational Marine Corps doctrinal publication.

warfighting readiness: Unit's actual combat capability (versus inspection readiness).

Weberian hierarchy: Model of bureaucracy (Max Weber) emphasizing rationality, rules, hierarchy, impersonality.

working it out: A euphemism used during the Vietnam War to describe the negotiation and compromise between officers and enlisted personnel regarding unit actions, signifying breakdown of authority.

zero-sum game/zero sum: Situation where one party's gain equals another's loss; applied to national status or decisions.

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