

## EXPLAINING THE OIL WARS MYTH

### Mad Max and El Dorado

**Science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths.**

—Karl Popper

Why is the oil wars myth so widely accepted? Why are people so ready to believe that countries fight over petroleum resources? One reason is the attraction of simple explanations. By reducing the causes of conflict to one factor—oil—the myth provides a parsimonious explanation for international violence. A second reason is petroleum’s exceptional value. Given the resource’s unique military and economic utility, the idea that countries fight to obtain it seems eminently plausible. Nevertheless, this chapter argues that the potency of the oil wars myth does not rest solely on theoretical parsimony or petroleum’s value. Oil has become “a critical component of intuitive explanations about the causes of war in the modern world” because the idea of countries fighting for petroleum aligns with two hegemonic myths about the causes of resource-related conflict: Mad Max and El Dorado.<sup>1</sup>

These two hegemonic myths posit different motives for violence. The Mad Max myth proposes that actors fight out of need. According to this narrative, individuals, groups, and countries are locked in existential struggles and must acquire certain, vital materials in order to survive. They fight for these materials because the consequence of failing to obtain them is death. The El Dorado myth, in contrast, asserts that actors fight out of greed. They aspire to grab copious amounts of valuable materials in order to increase their wealth. They engage in violence because it is profitable.<sup>2</sup>

Although the labels are new, these two hegemonic myths have permeated academic and popular discourses for centuries. The Mad Max myth emerged with Malthusian arguments about the consequences of unchecked population growth. The El Dorado myth was crafted by Spanish conquistadors, although its roots can

be traced back to the classical age. Since they originated, the myths have persistently reappeared in scholarly and popular representations of the causes of interpersonal, intergroup, and international resource-related conflict. The myths' power therefore arises in part from their familiarity. Repetition, in numerous settings, has reinforced their credibility. Over time, the Mad Max and El Dorado myths became accepted understandings of how the world works. They are now the conventional wisdom.

The myths' power also arises from their narrative structure. Although the Mad Max and El Dorado myths highlight specific motives for violence—need and greed—they offer much more than one-word explanations. They tell stories about how the struggle for existence and the pursuit of wealth lead to violent conflict. By tracing apparently credible pathways from motives to outcomes, the myths draw us in, encouraging us to overlook any false assumptions or logical inconsistencies in their storylines.<sup>3</sup> The Mad Max and El Dorado myths are easy to believe.

Each myth offers a compelling explanation for classic oil wars. According to the Mad Max myth, countries fight for oil because they need it for national survival. Alternatively, according to the El Dorado myth, they fight for oil because they greedily aspire to increase their national wealth. The narratives therefore provide two compelling foundations for the oil wars myth. They are, to paraphrase Cynthia Weber, what makes the classic oil war story make so much sense.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, by providing two distinct but complementary stories, the narratives render classic oil wars exceptionally believable. If El Dorado fails to rationalize a given conflict, Mad Max can step in. Thus, regardless of a person's foundational beliefs about actors' motives for violence, classic oil wars appear to be plausible events. When people accept both narratives, the oil wars myth is doubly credible.

In tracing the intellectual histories of the Mad Max and El Dorado myths, I do not seek to discredit them; I am agnostic about their accuracy as representations of actors' motives for violence. Instead, I aim to bring the oil wars myth's foundations out of the shadows of taken-for-granted knowledge and expose them to the light of critical scrutiny. These hegemonic narratives, like the oil wars myth, should be subject to question rather than accepted on blind faith. By revealing their persistence and showing how they structure popular understandings, including belief in classic oil wars, the chapter breaks their unconscious hold on our thinking, enabling us to challenge the oil wars myth itself.

## Need and Greed

Scholars have identified need and greed as central motives for violent conflict since at least the seventeenth century. In his classic work *Leviathan* (1651), the English

philosopher Thomas Hobbes identified three reasons that people fight each other: diffidence, competition, and glory.<sup>5</sup> The first two of these motives parallel the contemporary concepts of need and greed. “Diffidence,” as presented by Hobbes, is existential insecurity. In an anarchic world, without a central authority to protect them, people fear for their survival. Although they would prefer to avoid violent conflict, they must sometimes fight to defend themselves and the “modest” goods they require to live. Individuals motivated by diffidence therefore “invade . . . for safety”—that is, because of need. The second motive, competition, is effectively greed. According to Hobbes, individuals driven by this motive “invade for gain.” Unsatisfied with the basic goods required for their survival, they “use violence, to make themselves masters of other men’s persons, wives, children, and chattel.” They undertake “acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires.”<sup>6</sup>

Later international relations theorists developed their own need–greed dichotomies to classify actors’ motives for conflict. Hans Morgenthau asserted that people fight because of either conflicts of interest or their drive to dominate (*animus dominandi*). In conflicts of interest, individuals are concerned with their “vital needs.” They may nonetheless engage in violence when two actors require the same thing, which only one can possess; under these zero-sum circumstances, Morgenthau observed, “struggle and competition ensue.” In contrast, individuals motivated by the *animus dominandi* employ violence to obtain more power than they require for their survival.<sup>7</sup> Charles Glaser offers a similar dichotomy, distinguishing between “not-greedy” and “greedy” states. Not-greedy states, he claims, pursue their own survival. They have limited material ambitions but may still fight if their security depends on it. Greedy states, in contrast, are “willing to incur costs or risks for nonsecurity expansion.”<sup>8</sup> They attempt to obtain more than they need to survive.

The need–greed dichotomy is even more prominent in civil war studies. Since the 1990s, researchers have characterized rebels as needy or greedy, depending on their primary motive for aggression.<sup>9</sup> Needy rebels are motivated by grievances; they fight to rectify political, ethnic, or material inequalities, including maldistribution of natural resource rents. These combatants’ goal is to obtain “the general qualities required by people for their existence.”<sup>10</sup> Greedy rebels, in contrast, are motivated by a desire for gain. They challenge the central government or seek greater autonomy in order to grab natural resource rents and enrich themselves.<sup>11</sup> They are pursuing more than survival.

All of the need–greed dichotomies are simplifications. Both motives are ideal types and may be difficult to distinguish in practice; the line between actors that merely seek sufficient materials for their survival and those that aspire to a surplus is blurry. Nonetheless, together, these two ideal types offer a complemen-

tary pair of rationales for resource-related violence. Actors may fight for valuable raw materials because they require them to survive. Or they may fight for resources in order to amass great wealth. Both of these motives offer plausible explanations for resource wars.

However, single-word explanations, alone, rarely capture the popular imagination, even when conveyed with a punchy rhyme scheme. The need and greed motives have been embraced because they form the cores of two hegemonic myths: Mad Max and El Dorado. These myths, which have existed for centuries, tell the stories of how need and greed lead to violent conflict. It is the availability of these easily accessible narratives that renders both motives particularly plausible. Mad Max and El Dorado are the reasons that we believe in resource-related violence, including classic oil wars.

## The Mad Max Myth

The Mad Max myth is named for the cult film series, which was launched with the eponymous *Mad Max* in 1979.<sup>12</sup> The films take place in a postapocalyptic landscape where the remaining human population is fighting for its survival. In the series' second installment, *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981), a narrator explains how "this wasted land" came to be. "We have to go back to the other time," he intones, "when the world was powered by the black fuel and the desert sprouted great cities of pipe and steel." The narrator explains that this oil-powered world was brought down by a great war. "For reasons long forgotten," he pronounces, as the screen flickers through stock footage of twentieth-century conflicts, "two mighty warrior tribes went to war and touched off a blaze, which engulfed them all."<sup>13</sup>

The war shuttered oil production, leading to the collapse of industrialized societies. "Without fuel they were nothing," the narrator expounds. "They'd built a house of straw. The thundering machines sputtered and stopped. . . . Their world crumbled." The consequences of the petroleum shortage were devastating: "Cities exploded: a whirlwind of looting, a firestorm of fear. Men began to feed on men. On the roads it was a white-line nightmare. Only those mobile enough to scavenge, brutal enough to pillage would survive. The gangs took over the highways, ready to wage war for a tank of juice."<sup>14</sup> The rest of the film depicts a zero-sum battle over gasoline. A group of plucky civilians that controls an oil well and refinery confronts a biker gang that is determined to seize those facilities. The ensuing clashes are presented in stark, existential terms. Those who obtain fuel may live. Those who do not will die. The civilians eventually prevail, with Mad Max's help. However, it is clear that the fight for vital resources will continue.

The Mad Max franchise did not invent the idea that competition over critical resources provokes violent conflict. Rather, the films are particularly vivid instantiations of a hegemonic myth that has existed for centuries. I label it the Mad Max myth partly because the films have become a cultural shorthand for describing this type of desperate, dystopian, zero-sum struggle, but also because identifying the myth with a fictional narrative reminds us of its possibly illusory qualities. The Mad Max myth may reflect reality. But alternatively, it may not.

The Mad Max myth has appeared in many scholarly and popular guises. In all of these instances, it presents a consistent storyline. Actors—whether they are individuals, groups, or countries—are engaged in a struggle for existence. They require certain natural resources to survive. Yet, as a result of overconsumption or degradation, available resource supplies are insufficient to meet everyone's needs. Scarcity of these critical materials drives actors to desperate measures, including violent conflict. In short, actors fight because they need resources to live.

The modern progenitor of the Mad Max myth was the English theologian and economist Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834). In his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Malthus issued a gloomy prediction. Because population increases geometrically, while food production increases only arithmetically, societies will inevitably run short of sustenance. Food scarcity produces want and illness, at best, and famine and death, at worst. Malthus asserted that this dynamic was inescapable: a law of nature. All societies were condemned to periodic “misery and vice” brought on by food shortages.<sup>15</sup>

One of these vices was war. Malthus observed that, as societies grew, the search for sustenance compelled some members to expand into new territories. As he put it, “Young scions were then pushed out . . . and instructed to explore fresh regions and to gain happier seats for themselves by their swords.” If the lands they moved into were empty, shortages would be temporarily resolved. However, if the lands were already occupied, this emigration would trigger violent conflicts. “When they fell in with tribes like their own,” Malthus claimed, “the contest was a struggle for existence.” These zero-sum conflicts were inevitably intense. The losers would be exterminated by the victors or, deprived of food supplies, would perish “by hardship and famine.” Hence, groups “fought with a desperate courage, inspired by the reflection that death was the punishment of defeat and life the prize of victory.”<sup>16</sup> In the aftermath of these existential battles, the victors' food needs would be temporarily sated. However, Malthus observed grimly, there was no escaping a law of nature. Eventually, the victorious population would again outstrip its food supplies, prompting further want, expansion, and war.

In later editions of his work, Malthus provided extensive examples of groups fighting over scarce food resources. He drew on contemporary anthropological

research, including chronicles of Captain James Cook's voyages, to describe patterns of violent conflict among New Zealanders, South Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. He claimed that these societies were frequently confronted with food scarcity and "it may be imagined that the distress must be dreadful." Quoting Cook, Malthus surmised that the groups were "perpetually destroying each other by violence, as the only alternative of perishing by hunger."<sup>17</sup> Malthus suggested that these contests had biblical precedents and attributed persistent tribal warfare in Arabia and Central Asia to shortages of fertile agricultural land and pastures. He also applied his theory to Europe, asserting that sustenance needs had driven expansion and violence under the Roman Empire and during the Dark Ages.<sup>18</sup>

Malthus's *Essay* was widely read during his lifetime and captured the imaginations of many later thinkers. One of the first to acknowledge his indebtedness to Malthus was Charles Darwin. In his *Autobiography* (1887), the naturalist wrote that he read the *Essay* in autumn 1838.<sup>19</sup> By that point, Darwin had already developed the idea of natural selection. However, he was missing a key piece of the puzzle: a rationale for why the process occurs. Malthus's concept of a struggle for existence, brought on by the imbalance between population and food supplies, provided that underlying stimulus. As Darwin later wrote, "Reading Malthus, I saw at once how to apply this principle."<sup>20</sup> Scarcity prompted competition, which the fittest individuals survived, while the less fit perished.

In an 1844 essay, Darwin drew an explicit connection between his work and the theologian's, claiming that his evolutionary theory was "the doctrine of Malthus applied in most cases with ten-fold force."<sup>21</sup> Darwin also referred to the intellectual inheritance in his most famous work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859). He reiterated that his theory was "the doctrine of Malthus, applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms," and presented his argument in Malthusian terms. "More individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive," the naturalist explained; "consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence."<sup>22</sup>

Initially, Darwin only applied Malthus's logic to the plant and animal kingdoms. These nonhuman species, Darwin argued, lacked the "moral restraint" that could act as a check on population growth, thereby mitigating the struggle for existence among humans.<sup>23</sup> However, in *The Descent of Man* (1871) and in his personal correspondence, Darwin flirted with applying his theory to people. In *Descent*, he asserted that, "as man suffers from the same physical evils as the lower animals, he has no right to expect an immunity from the evils consequent on the struggle for existence."<sup>24</sup> Other authors also embraced this social extension of Darwin's argument. Herbert Spencer, who famously coined the phrase "survival of

the fittest,” claimed that the struggle for existence and natural selection were universal mechanisms. They operated within human societies, he asserted, as well as among nonhuman species.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, political geographers were applying Malthusian and Darwinian arguments to nation-states.<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Ratzel, the “father of political geography,” conceived of states as organisms and argued that, like plant, animal, and human populations, they have an inherent tendency to expand. For states, expansion meant acquiring additional territory, which he referred to as *lebensraum* (living space). Ratzel asserted that, like other organisms, states were subject to natural selection. Accordingly, in the course of their expansion, stronger states would naturally displace weaker ones. This “struggle for space” was the geopolitical equivalent of Darwin’s “struggle for existence.”<sup>27</sup>

Political geographers argued that, to increase their chances of survival, states expanded into areas that were strategically and economically valuable. One of their aims was to satisfy a Malthusian compulsion to acquire sufficient food supplies. However, states also needed to obtain critical raw materials, such as iron and coal, which were increasingly important contributors to countries’ economic and political survival.<sup>28</sup> These expansionist efforts were likely to provoke interstate conflicts. By the late nineteenth century, when the discipline of political geography emerged, the world had become a very crowded place. Europe was fully divided into contiguous nation-states, and the preceding century’s rush for colonies had apportioned much of the rest of the globe. Consequently, countries that needed more land or vital resources could not simply expand into unclaimed territories. Instead, as Vladimir Lenin observed in *Imperialism* (1917), they would have to displace each other, triggering interstate conflict.<sup>29</sup>

Geopolitical arguments, emphasizing the need for secure access to vital raw materials, flourished during the interwar period. However, they fell out of favor after World War II, because of their association with Nazi Germany.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, similar arguments revived only a quarter century later. In 1972, Nazli Choucri and Robert North introduced “lateral pressure theory,” which argued that “growing population and developing technology places rapidly increasing *demands* upon resources, often resulting in internally generated *pressures*” (emphasis in original). This pressure prompted states to expand and, when multiple countries pursued the same strategy simultaneously, provoked international violence. As Choucri and North asserted, “There is a strong possibility that eventually the two opposing spheres of interest will intersect. The more intense the *intersections*, the greater will be the likelihood that competition will assume *military* dimensions. When this happens, we may expect competition to become transformed into conflict” (emphasis in original).<sup>31</sup> The authors attributed a number of interstate conflicts, including World War I, to lateral pressure.<sup>32</sup>

The 1970s were a welcoming environment for neo-Malthusian arguments like Choucri and North's. In the late 1960s, a significant increase in world population propelled books like Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* (1968), which highlighted the dangers posed by demographic pressure, onto the best-seller list.<sup>33</sup> *The Limits to Growth* (1972), a study commissioned by the Club of Rome, provoked similar fears of natural resource shortages.<sup>34</sup> Petroleum scarcity, in particular, was a growing concern. In 1972, the former US secretary of the interior Stewart Udall warned that declining US oil production would soon lead to petroleum shortages.<sup>35</sup> Six months later, James E. Akins, the director of the US State Department's Office of Fuels and Energy, echoed Udall's fears in a *Foreign Affairs* article entitled "The Oil Crisis: This Time, the Wolf Is Here."<sup>36</sup>

These pessimistic predictions proved to be prescient. By summer 1973, US consumers were facing gasoline shortages, precipitated partly by resource scarcity, but also by the Nixon administration's oil price controls. The energy crisis intensified that October, when Arab members of OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) raised the price of oil, cut petroleum production, and restricted exports to the United States and several other countries in retaliation for those countries' support of Israel in the 1973 Arab–Israeli War. The US government imposed rationing programs on gasoline and heating oil, gas stations ran out of fuel, and Americans queued for hours to fill up their tanks. Truckers staged violent blockades to protest high gasoline prices, and fights broke out at gas stations as motorists attempted to obtain needed fuel.<sup>37</sup> The Iranian Revolution, in 1978–1979, precipitated a second energy crisis. Recalling their earlier experience with fuel scarcity, Americans engaged in panic buying, exacerbating gasoline shortages and provoking violence. Truckers again protested, sparking riots, and, in May 1979, a motorist was shot and killed in a gas line.<sup>38</sup>

The first two Mad Max films were released in 1979 and 1981, in the midst of the second energy crisis. Although produced in Australia, rather than the United States, they reflected the intense popular anxiety about resource shortages that prevailed in many industrialized countries at the time. Under these disquieting conditions, it was easy to believe that people and countries would fight over scarce, vital resources, especially oil. The Mad Max myth's credibility was further buttressed by politicians, who suggested that petroleum shortages could lead to violent conflicts. In late 1974, then-US secretary of state Henry Kissinger asserted that the United States might attempt to seize foreign oil if the industrialized world faced "strangulation" by Arab producers.<sup>39</sup> In January 1980, President Jimmy Carter issued the Carter Doctrine, asserting that the United States would respond forcefully to any attempt to interrupt Persian Gulf oil flows. Ronald Reagan issued warnings about impending resource wars during his 1980 presidential campaign, and, in autumn 1981, the new US secretary of state, Alexander Haig,

boldly announced that “the era of the resource war has arrived.”<sup>40</sup> Alarmist scholarship on the subject flourished.<sup>41</sup>

By the mid-1980s, however, these fears had subsided. The oil price collapse in 1986, following an improvement in access to mineral supplies from southern Africa and a declining Soviet threat to the Persian Gulf, temporarily curtailed resource scarcity concerns.<sup>42</sup> Yet Malthusian narratives revived, in a different guise, only a few years later. In the 1990s, numerous research programs, including Thomas Homer-Dixon’s Toronto Group, began to argue that scarcity of critical renewable resources, including cropland, timber, and water supplies, could inspire intrastate conflict.<sup>43</sup> The journalist Robert Kaplan popularized these arguments in a notorious *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled “The Coming Anarchy.” Predicting that population growth and resource competition would inevitably lead to disease, poverty, and violence, Kaplan returned the Mad Max myth to its intellectual roots. “It is Thomas Malthus,” he asserted, “the philosopher of demographic doomsday, who is now the prophet.”<sup>44</sup>

Kaplan’s alarmist claims found a sympathetic political audience. President Bill Clinton was so stirred by “The Coming Anarchy” that he faxed it to all American embassies.<sup>45</sup> “I was so gripped by many things that were in that article and by the more academic treatment of the same subject by Professor Homer Dixon,” he later claimed in a speech to the National Academy of Sciences. The president also explicitly linked these articles to earlier Malthusian narratives; “You could visualize a world in which [we] . . . look like we’re in one of those Mel Gibson ‘Road Warrior’ movies,” he stated.<sup>46</sup> Kaplan’s article also purportedly inspired Vice President Al Gore to create the State Failure Task Force to analyze the connections between environmental degradation and state collapse.<sup>47</sup> People found the idea of subnational conflicts over critical resources eminently plausible.

By the 2000s, the specter of interstate resource conflicts had also revived. In his popular book *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet*, Michael Klare argued that growth in natural resource demand, coupled with declining global supplies, would “inevitably” lead to international violence. He described this threatening dynamic in Darwinian terms. States were “predators” that were “hungry” and “thirst[y]” for vital natural resources. To satisfy these needs, they engaged in “a ferocious struggle over diminishing sources of supply.”<sup>48</sup> His extended description of these conflicts mirrored Malthus’s: “Those that retain access to adequate supplies of critical materials will flourish, while those unable to do so will experience hardship and decline. The competition among the various powers, therefore, will be ruthless, unrelenting, and severe. Every key player in the race for what’s left will do whatever it can to advance its own position, while striving without mercy to eliminate or subdue all the others.”<sup>49</sup> The consequences of resource competition could be devastating; Klare warned that “the potential to slide across this thresh-

old into armed conflict and possibly Great Power confrontation poses one of the greatest dangers facing the planet today.”<sup>50</sup>

Much of Klare’s work has emphasized the risks of oil wars specifically. In *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet*, he presented international competition over petroleum resources as “a voracious, zero-sum contest that, if allowed to continue along present paths, can only lead to conflict among the major powers.”<sup>51</sup> Klare also claimed that these conflicts had significant historical precedents; as he put it, “Governments have repeatedly gone to war over what they view as ‘vital national interests,’ including oil and water supplies.”<sup>52</sup> As “peak oil” fears intensified in the mid-2000s, many authors issued similarly alarmist claims about the prospects of future petroleum conflicts, especially between the United States and China. Great powers were expected to fight over the world’s diminishing oil supplies.<sup>53</sup>

The Mad Max myth permeates popular culture, as well as academic and political discourses. Many films depict competitions over scarce, vital resources. In classic Westerns, water conflicts are a recurrent trope. John Wayne fights for water access in *Riders of Destiny* (1933) and *King of the Pecos* (1936).<sup>54</sup> In *The Big Country* (1958), Gregory Peck becomes enmeshed in a struggle over cattle watering rights.<sup>55</sup> Water conflicts also appear in *Chinatown* (1974), which fictionalizes the historical struggle over the Owens Valley water supply, and *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), in which local farmers’ efforts to water their fields spark contention with land developers.<sup>56</sup> The heroes of *Tank Girl* (1995), the James Bond film *Quantum of Solace* (2008), and the fourth installment of the Mad Max series, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), also fight against powerful adversaries who have monopolized control over local water resources.<sup>57</sup> In all of these films, the protagonists need water to survive and can only obtain it through violence.<sup>58</sup>

Resource scarcity and its noxious effects are also prominent features of many postapocalyptic and disaster movies. The premise of films like *Avatar* (2009), *Elysium* (2013), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Wall-E* (2008) is that overpopulation, overconsumption of natural resources, and natural disasters have pushed humankind to the brink of collapse.<sup>59</sup> In some of these films, the remaining human population responds to resource shortages by migrating: relocating to space stations or other planets. In others, societies have developed more novel—and unpleasant—ways to cope with scarcity. In *Logan’s Run* (1976), people are executed at the age of thirty to conserve resources. In *Soylent Green* (1973), the population is fed with human remains.<sup>60</sup>

Resource scarcity also prompts violent conflicts. In many postapocalyptic film and television landscapes, including those of *The Walking Dead* (2010–) and *Into the Badlands*, (2015–2019), people fight each other for vital resources.<sup>61</sup> Many alien movies depict Malthusian struggles on an interplanetary scale; extraterrestrials descend on Earth in order to secure access to critical materials. In *The War*

of the Worlds (1953), the Martians invade because of water, clean air, and natural resource shortages on their home planet. As the film's narrator explains, "Mars is more than 140 million miles from the sun, and for centuries has been in the last status of exhaustion. . . . Inhabitants of this dying planet looked across space with instruments and intelligences that which we have scarcely dreamed, searching for another world to which they could migrate."<sup>62</sup> Aliens' efforts to obtain needed resources—usually by exterminating humans—also drive aggression in *Independence Day* (1996), *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011), and *Oblivion* (2013).<sup>63</sup>

Need-driven conflicts over oil, specifically, are a relatively uncommon plot device. Although politicians and academics regularly present oil as a vital state need, culturally, oil competition is more commonly associated with greed. However, in addition to propelling *The Road Warrior*, need-driven oil conflict is the linchpin of the television series, *Occupied* (2015–).<sup>64</sup> In this series' fictionalized world, Norway is a critical petroleum supplier, since wars have interrupted Middle Eastern oil production and the United States has halted petroleum exports. However, the environmentally minded Norwegian government has decided to shutter its oil industry in order to combat climate change. The European Union, desperate for fuel, endorses a Russian invasion of the recalcitrant Scandinavian producer. Although initially peaceful, the occupation soon sparks local protests, armed resistance, and military crackdowns. The logic underpinning this violence is never questioned; clearly, the series implies, countries will fight for oil when they need it for their survival.

The same logic appears at the end of Sydney Pollack's thriller *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). Having discovered that a renegade CIA unit killed his colleagues to conceal its plan to seize Middle Eastern oil, Turner (Robert Redford) confronts Higgins (Cliff Robertson), insisting to his superior that the American people would be appalled by the agency's behavior. Higgins responds scornfully, "Ask them when they're running out. Ask them when there's no heat in their homes and they're cold. Ask them when their engines stop. Ask them when people who have never known hunger start going hungry. You want to know something? They won't want us to ask them. They'll just want us to get it for them!" When faced with an existential crisis, people will embrace international oil grabs.<sup>65</sup>

Mad Max therefore offers one explanation for classic oil wars. According to this narrative, petroleum provokes violent conflict when countries need more oil in order to survive. The narrative is compelling, both because of oil's exceptional military and economic value and because of the apparent plausibility of the Mad Max myth, whose grounding in Malthusian and Darwinian arguments gives it a veneer of natural law, while its repetition, in numerous scholarly and popular contexts, makes it an easily accessible trope. Mad Max offers a consistent, resonant story about how actors respond to natural resource scarcity. Nonetheless, the in-

tensity of classic oil war convictions cannot be attributed only to the Mad Max myth. The El Dorado myth offers an equally compelling narrative, explaining why countries fight over oil. This story, too, is grounded in natural resources' value. However, it emphasizes resources' ability to convey enormous wealth rather than their capacity to satisfy existential imperatives. In the El Dorado myth, it is greed, not need, that drives violence.

## The El Dorado Myth

*"Over the Mountains  
Of the Moon,  
Down the Valley of the Shadow,  
Ride, boldly ride,"  
The shade replied,  
"If you seek for Eldorado!"  
—Edgar Allan Poe, "Eldorado"*

El Dorado was originally a mythical individual. In the 1530s, rumors began to circulate among Spanish conquistadors about a gilded man, living in the Colombian highlands. The story's initial source was reportedly an indigenous guide from Quito who recounted his tale to the followers of Sebastián de Benalcázar. The guide described an unusual ritual practiced by the Chibcha group, from Cundinamarca Province, near present-day Bogotá.<sup>66</sup> He claimed that, when the Chibcha appointed a new leader, they ritually anointed the man with a sticky resin and then covered him in gold dust. The leader was rowed out to the middle of Lake Guatavitá, where he washed off the gold dust and cast other gilded artifacts into the water.<sup>67</sup>

The conquistadors were a receptive audience for stories of golden treasure. Hernán Cortés's 1519 seizure of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, which garnered him astronomical amounts of gold, had already become the stuff of legend. Benalcázar's men may also have heard tales of Francisco Pizarro's 1532 defeat of the Inca Empire. The captured Inca leader, Atahualpa, had offered Pizarro a room filled once with gold and twice with silver in exchange for his release. To the conquistadors' delight, Atahualpa fulfilled his side of the bargain. The Spaniards, however, reneged on their promise. Having obtained the Incas' gold, they executed their leader—one of the many acts of violence perpetrated during the Spaniards' search for gilded treasure.

The apparent abundance of Latin American gold resources and the ease with which Cortés and Pizarro had seized them suggested that further riches could be

ripe for the taking. The tale of El Dorado, which provided a hint as to where the next fortune might lie, triggered an impassioned hunt that would last for almost a century. As Charles Nicholl writes, “The idea of El Dorado: the probability that it was there, the possibility of finding it, the untold riches it contained—was a craze that gripped people. It had the force field of a cultish religion.”<sup>68</sup> In 1536, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada hunted for the gilded man and his treasure in the Colombian interior. His brother, Hernán Pérez de Quesada, tried to drain the fabled Lake Guatavita in order to collect golden artifacts. In 1540, Gonzalo Pizarro, Francisco’s half-brother, led an expedition into the Amazon Basin, searching for El Dorado.<sup>69</sup> In addition, a number of German conquistadors, including Georg von Speyer, Nikolaus Federmann, and Abrosius Ehringer, hunted for El Dorado in Venezuela and Colombia from the mid-1530s to the 1540s.<sup>70</sup>

Over time, El Dorado evolved from a person into a place. In the 1590s, Sir Walter Raleigh scoured Guyana not for a gilded leader but for a city whose buildings and streets were paved with gold. Raleigh claimed to have discovered the city in 1595.<sup>71</sup> However, his expedition, like those that preceded it, was largely unsuccessful. None of the treasure hunts unearthed extensive riches, and scores of people perished along the way. Often, searches for El Dorado devolved into ruthless violence, as conquistadors and their retinues fought among themselves and with local populations. Contemporary descriptions of Ehringer’s expedition are particularly vivid, reporting that “chieftans were enslaved . . . rebellious captives were burned alive, even friendly Indians, bringing gifts, were cut to pieces.”<sup>72</sup>

The contours of the El Dorado myth are therefore consistent, even though the legend’s precise target and location have shifted over time. At the myth’s core is the idea of fabulous wealth. The riches that exist, either in the gilded man’s body or in a golden city, are assumed to be dazzlingly large. Anyone who finds them will obtain wealth beyond his wildest dreams and a lifetime of comfort and pleasure. People’s feverish desire to obtain these riches provokes intense greed, which can inspire extreme acts, including violence.<sup>73</sup>

The El Dorado myth is intertwined with a number of other, similar legends. Francisco Coronado spent years crisscrossing Mexico and the American Southwest in search of the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola, a group of settlements that were supposedly encrusted with jewels and gold.<sup>74</sup> Another conquistador, Juan Ponce de León, traversed the Florida cays, hunting for the fountain of youth. In Greek mythology, Jason and his Argonauts pursued the Golden Fleece, and in Arthurian lore, the knights of the Round Table sought the Holy Grail.<sup>75</sup> Each of these searches was driven by desire for an enormously valuable treasure. And each group that sought these fabled artifacts faced privations, danger, and violence during its quest.

The El Dorado myth has not been as prominent in scholarly discourses as the Mad Max myth. There are no historical equivalents to Malthus, Darwin, or Ratzel that offer a general theory of how actors' resource greed provokes violent conflict. Contemporary civil wars scholarship, however, is replete with accounts of greedy rebels enriching themselves by prosecuting intrastate conflicts in gold-, diamond-, and oil-endowed territories.<sup>76</sup> At the international level, critiques of imperialism often possess El Dorado undertones. Jack Snyder, for example, identifies "El Dorado and Manifest Destiny" as one of the myths that fuel imperial overexpansion.<sup>77</sup> In addition, researchers often attribute specific acts of international aggression to resource greed; Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, in particular, is regularly depicted in these terms.<sup>78</sup>

Nonetheless, the El Dorado myth—and the themes that underpin it—have been more prominent in literature and popular culture than in international relations theory. Narratives about gold's pernicious effects date back to the classical era. In his epic poem *Metamorphoses* (8 AD), Ovid blamed the mineral for the fall of man:

Thus cursed steel, and more accursed gold  
Gave mischief birth, and made that mischief bold;  
And double death did wretched man invade,  
By steel assaulted, and by gold betrayed.<sup>79</sup>

Because of desire for gold, Ovid asserted, "mankind is broken loose from moral bands." Interactions that were once characterized by "truth, modesty, and shame" are now dominated by "fraud, avarice, and force."<sup>80</sup> In the *Aeneid* (29–19 BC), Virgil presented several stories of men's gold lust provoking terrible, violent behaviors. Pygmalion murdered his sister Dido's husband in order to obtain great wealth; as Virgil chronicled, "Then strife ensued and cursed gold the cause."<sup>81</sup> Polymnestor murdered Polydorus, King Priam's son, after accepting a gilded payment to protect him. "O sacred hunger of pernicious gold!" the poet lamented, "What bands of faith can impious lucre hold?"<sup>82</sup>

In *The Divine Comedy* (1320), Dante Alighieri, who drew on the *Aeneid* for inspiration, placed Pygmalion and Polymnestor in the fourth circle of hell, where biblical, mythical, and historical individuals are punished for greed. Another of the condemned, Achen, was censured for stealing gold and silver from the spoils of the Battle of Jericho, which provoked God to cause the Israelites' defeat at Canaan.<sup>83</sup> Dante also expounded on the dangers posed by greed in his earlier work *Convivio*. "What else," he queried, "imperils and slays cities, countries, and single persons so much as the new amassing of wealth by anyone?" The goal of acquiring riches, Dante cautioned, "may not be reached without wrong to someone."<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, he warned, avarice is never satisfied. Although “the false traitoresses promise . . . to remove every thirst and every want and to bring satiety and sufficiency,” in practice, obtaining some wealth only produces more “feverish” desire. “For never,” the poet observed, “is the thirst of cupidity filled nor sated.”<sup>85</sup>

Gold lust also inspired violence in one of the stories in Chaucer’s fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*. “The Pardoner’s Tale” depicts three young men who set out to find and kill Death. Following an old man’s instructions, they search for Death under a particular oak tree. When they arrive at the specified locale, they see only a large store of gold coins. The young men joyfully plan to divide their new riches and travel onward the next day. However, during the night, their greed for gold inspires violent betrayals. Two of the men kill the third to obtain a greater share of the wealth. However, the murdered man has already poisoned the others’ wine. Thus, by morning, all three have found Death.<sup>86</sup>

Contemporary retellings of “The Pardoner’s Tale” have framed the story as a golden treasure hunt. In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), three prospectors, played by Humphrey Bogart, Tim Holt, and Walter Huston, decide to search for gold in Mexico’s Sierra Madre mountains. The miners expect to acquire exorbitant riches. As Bogart’s character, Fred Dobbs, claims, “This is the country where the nuggets of gold are just cryin’ for ya to take ’em out of the ground and make ’em shine.” He optimistically predicts that, “If we make a find, we’ll be lightin’ our cigars with hundred-dollar bills.”<sup>87</sup>

The miners’ quest is initially successful; they discover a rich vein of gold and extract enough ore to make them all extremely wealthy. However, the appearance of gilded treasure sparks intense greed. As Huston’s character, a grizzled old prospector named Howard, observes early in the film, “When the piles of gold begin to grow . . . that’s when the trouble starts.” Howard recognizes that gold lust is insatiable. As he says to the other miners, “I tell you, if you was to make a real strike, you couldn’t be dragged away. Not even the threat of miserable death would keep you from trying to add ten thousand more. Ten you want to get twenty-five. Twenty-five you want to get fifty. Fifty, a hundred. Like roulette. One more turn, you know. Always one more.”<sup>88</sup>

As Howard predicts, Dobbs’s insatiable gold lust eventually drives him to violence. Desiring all the riches for himself and fearing that his partners plan to steal his share, Dobbs shoots Holt’s character and grabs everyone’s gold. While trying to escape, however, he is captured and killed by bandits. Describing Dobbs’s noxious acts, Howard is empathetic. Any man could have given into the temptation, he claims, including himself. The pursuit of El Dorado can incite anyone to violence.

Many other popular films have presented El Dorado narratives. An animated feature, *The Road to El Dorado* (2000), portrays a hunt for the gilded city.<sup>89</sup> Har-

ri son Ford searches for El Dorado in the final installment of the Indiana Jones series, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). The series' third film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), features a hunt for a golden cross that belonged to Francisco Coronado, as well as a quest for the Holy Grail.<sup>90</sup> In *National Treasure: Book of Secrets* (2007), Nicolas Cage searches for Cibola.<sup>91</sup> Other films, including *Treasure Island* (1950), *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1967), *Three Kings* (1999), *Goonies* (1985), and *The Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), also depict golden treasure hunts.<sup>92</sup> All of movies involve at least the threat of violence, as actors pursue enormous wealth.

The El Dorado myth has also surfaced in historical events. Gold rushes in California (1848–1855), Australia (1851), South Africa (1886), and Alaska's Klondike (1896–1899) were all described by contemporaries as hunts for El Dorado.<sup>93</sup> Accounts of these episodes also regularly referred to gold's pernicious effects.<sup>94</sup> The desire for gold, witnesses observed, "set men's minds on fire," producing a "madness" or "mania."<sup>95</sup> This "gold fever" provoked intense avarice, which, in the words of William E. Connelley, a Kansas pioneer, "changed the American from a conservative, contented citizen satisfied with a reasonable return on his investment to an excitable, restless, insatiable person who wished to realize on the resources of the universe in a day. It was the beginning of our national madness, of our insanity of greed."<sup>96</sup> Men suffering from gold fever felt compelled to pursue their gilded ambitions, regardless of the consequences; the allure of treasure was too powerful to resist. As accounts from the gold fields regularly attested, these ambitions frequently provoked violence. Prospectors turned against each other to grab resources and seize each other's claims.<sup>97</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, the El Dorado myth was extended from gold to oil. The oil fields of western Pennsylvania, the site of the original American oil boom, were nicknamed "Oildorado."<sup>98</sup> So were early California oil fields.<sup>99</sup> The towns of El Dorado, Kansas, and El Dorado, Arkansas, received their names during later petroleum booms. Oil companies also adopted the El Dorado moniker; the Eldorado Drilling Company is located in Oklahoma and the Dorado Oil Company in Texas.<sup>100</sup> Journalists regularly identify oil-producing regions as "El Dorados," particularly after a new strike. Petroleum's nickname—"black gold"—further reinforces the connection. However, other oil-related references to El Dorado are subtler. In the film *Giant* (1956), which takes place in the midst of a Texas oil boom, oilman Jett Rink (James Dean) owns the Conquistador Hotel.<sup>101</sup>

Scholars have also drawn connections between oil and El Dorado. Geographer Michael Watts refers to petroleum producing countries like Nigeria and Ecuador as "petrolic El Dorado[s]."<sup>102</sup> Terry Lynn Karl entitled a chapter of her influential text *The Paradox of Plenty* "Spanish Gold to Black Gold: Commodity Booms Then and Now."<sup>103</sup> Leonardo Maugeri called a chapter of his petroleum history

"The Soviet Implosion and the Troubled Caspian El Dorado."<sup>104</sup> These linguistic flourishes underscore that oil, like gold, is a source of "fantastic wealth."<sup>105</sup> Other authors convey a similar message by applying the term *prize* to international oil competitions. The title of Daniel Yergin's monumental history of the petroleum industry, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, communicates petroleum's value and the extraordinary lengths actors will go to in order to acquire it. Timothy Winegard repeats these tropes in *The First World Oil War* when he refers to certain World War I campaigns as "quest[s] to possess . . . petroleum prizes."<sup>106</sup>

Journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski has offered perhaps the most evocative description of oil's powerful appeal and its pernicious effects. In his words, petroleum "kindles extraordinary emotions and hopes, since oil is above all a great temptation. It is the temptation of ease, wealth, strength, fortune, power. . . . To discover and possess the source of oil is to feel as if, after wandering long underground, you have suddenly stumbled upon royal treasure."<sup>107</sup> The prospect of obtaining this exceptional wealth can drive people to depravity. As Kapuscinski observes, the desire for oil "anesthetizes thought, blurs vision, corrupts."<sup>108</sup> Similarly, during the western Pennsylvania oil boom, commentators observed that prospectors had "oil on the brain" and were regularly struck with "oil fever."<sup>109</sup> This malady, like gold fever, addled their judgment and could have deadly effects.

The film *There Will Be Blood* (2007), adapted from Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1927), provides the most vivid fictional representation of petroleum greed's destructive power. Set in the oil fields of Southern California in the early 1900s, the film depicts the efforts of prospector Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day Lewis) to amass a fortune from oil.<sup>110</sup> Plainview and other oilmen believe that vast wealth is at stake; in Sinclair's novel, one of the prospectors predicts that petroleum exploration will "yield him a treasure that would make all the oldtime fairy tales and Arabian Nights adventures seem childish things."<sup>111</sup> The oilmen also recognize that petroleum acquisition can incite conflict. One prospector describes a local tussle over the terms of an oil lease in Prospect Hill: "You remember how we heard the racket. . . . Son, that was a little oil war!"<sup>112</sup>

In *There Will Be Blood*, Plainview's oil greed propels him to violence. In the process of amassing his fortune, the oilman swindles and beats his neighbors, blasphemes the church, and murders a business associate. Eventually, Plainview's lust for black gold drives him mad. Enconced in an enormous mansion with a bowling alley in the basement, the oilman confronts his longtime adversary, preacher Eli Sunday (Paul Dano). After ridiculing Sunday, Plainview murders him by smashing in his head with a bowling pin.<sup>113</sup> Oil inspires the same ruthless, violent behaviors as its gilded counterpart.

The El Dorado myth proposes that actors fight for more than survival. Rather than simply acquiring sufficient resources to fulfill their basic needs, they aspire to fantastic wealth and are willing to go to extraordinary, often violent lengths in order to obtain it. This myth is intuitively plausible, especially for people who possess a more cynical view of human nature. Moreover, to accept the El Dorado myth, it is not necessary to believe that every person or country is greedy. As long as some actors covet treasure, El Dorado provides a compelling explanation for resource-related conflict.

Individually, the Mad Max and El Dorado myths present two distinct pathways from valuable resources to violence: one emphasizing resource need and the other highlighting resource greed. Each therefore incorporates a core motive for conflict that is widely recognized by international relations and conflict theorists. Each myth has also been reiterated for centuries, if not millennia, in popular and academic discourses. These myths have become the conventional wisdom explaining why states fight for valuable natural resources. They therefore provide a durable foundation for the oil wars myth by rendering petroleum-related contention doubly plausible. Since we believe in Mad Max and El Dorado, we believe in classic oil wars.