

PETRO-MYTHS AND PETRO-REALITIES

Despite oil's extraordinary economic and military value, countries have largely refrained from international petroleum grabs. They have avoided classic oil wars. Only one state has launched an oil gambit. A few countries have initiated oil campaigns, in the midst of ongoing international wars that were started for other reasons. States have perpetrated fewer than twenty oil spats. These numbers are remarkably small, particularly in comparison to the number of countries that could have fought to obtain petroleum resources over the course of almost a century. Moreover, countries initiated their oil spats selectively, reserving them for situations in which obstacles were limited or additional gains were large. In the severe conflicts—the oil campaigns and oil gambit—leaders exhausted all other means of satisfying national petroleum needs before turning to international aggression. And in all the conflicts, petroleum ambitions were never decision makers' sole motive for aggression. States are evidently extremely reluctant to fight for oil resources.

My findings controvert the oil wars myth, as well as popular interpretations of many of the twentieth century's deadliest international conflicts. They also challenge international relations scholars' assumptions that fighting for oil pays and that the resource is a significant cause of interstate conflict. In addition, these results raise a number of further questions. First, will countries fight to control petroleum resources in the future if oil prices rise or fall? Second, why is oil different from other natural resources that were the objects of imperialist projects? Third, how does the divergence between the oil wars myth and the historical record matter? Fourth, does states' reluctance to prosecute classic oil wars, oil

gambits, oil campaigns, and oil spats affect their willingness to engage in other forms of oil-related contention? And fifth, what does this mean for US foreign policy? This conclusion will begin to answer these questions, while encouraging other researchers to pursue them further.

Same as It Never Was

As oil prices climbed in the early 2000s, commentators issued increasingly dire predictions of incipient “peak oil”: the apex of global petroleum production, followed by an inevitable decline in resource output and concomitant jump in oil prices.¹ However, after 2014, when oil prices plummeted, the discourse quickly flipped to predictions of “peak oil demand”: the apex of global petroleum *consumption*—precipitated by improving fuel efficiency, electrified transportation, and a transition to renewable energy sources—which would cause oil prices to stagnate or decline.² Thus, in less than twenty years, we have anticipated two dramatically different energy futures. Yet neither of these trajectories is likely to alter the frequency of conflicts over oil resources. Countries refrained from classic oil wars when prices were below \$10 per barrel, and they avoided them when prices soared above \$145. There is no reason to expect their behavior to change in the future. States will continue to eschew classic oil wars and red herrings will remain the dominant form of conflict in hydrocarbon-endowed territories.

Countries will also continue to prosecute oil campaigns in the midst of ongoing wars as long as their militaries run on petroleum-based fuels. However, these larger conflicts will not be driven by countries’ oil ambitions; instead, if history is an accurate guide, they will be provoked by hegemonic aspirations. China is therefore the most likely future oil campaigner. If China and the United States become involved in a hegemonic war, the latter may try to interrupt the former’s oil access in order to obtain a military advantage.³ China may respond by launching an oil campaign, most likely targeting central Asia or Siberia, after exhausting all other means of meeting its wartime petroleum needs.

Oil spats will also remain a persistent feature of international politics, regardless of changes in resource prices. Rival states, such as China and Japan, will be particularly prone to these conflicts, as they obtain additional benefits from petroleum sparring. Rising oil prices could increase the frequency of oil spats, as these conflicts will appear marginally more beneficial, while entailing the same, relatively low costs. However, declining oil prices could also precipitate more oil spats, as falling oil revenue will incite popular discontent in many petroleum-producing states, encouraging governments to engage in diversionary activities, including oil sparring. Venezuela’s president, Nicolas Maduro, has already

attempted this maneuver, decrying ExxonMobil's development of recently discovered Guyanese oil fields, partly to distract Venezuelans from their country's economic meltdown.⁴ The frequency of future oil spats is therefore uncertain. However, regardless of their number, these mild incidents will not threaten international security, as they consistently fail to escalate.

Oil gambits are far more dangerous but will remain extremely uncommon. The one historical case, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, demonstrated that an exceptional constellation of circumstances is required for a state to initiate an oil gambit. First, a prospective aggressor must believe that it faces an existential threat that it could resist by seizing foreign petroleum resources. Second, it must possess a viable target: a neighboring, oil-producing state that it can defeat militarily. Third, it must have exhausted all other means of increasing its petroleum resources or revenue before initiating its attack. These criteria are not particularly sensitive to oil prices, so oil gambits will remain rare and desperate events.

These patterns will only change if the oil wars myth begins to drive leaders' decision making. If officials believe that countries fight wars to obtain petroleum resources, the narrative could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁵ Anticipating that other countries will perpetrate international oil grabs, states may engage in increasingly mercantilist activities to secure their access to petroleum supplies. In doing so, they will restrict global trade and antagonize other countries, heightening international tensions and limiting states' ability to peacefully satisfy their resource needs. Under these circumstances, governments may eventually be compelled to initiate classic oil wars. In contrast, questioning the oil wars myth will help states resist these autarkic urges, reducing the risk that they will later have to fight for oil resources.

Is Oil the Exception?

As I noted in chapter 1, many authors claim that oil is exceptional, in the sense that it is the one natural resource that countries will fight for.⁶ However, my analysis revealed that states may be *less* willing to fight for petroleum than for other resources. Oil has not inspired the same imperial adventurism that gold, spices, salt, and iron provoked in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The reasons for this discontinuity, I argue, are the characteristics of the oil industry and timing. By 1912, when petroleum became valuable enough to potentially fight over, states already faced substantial obstacles to seizing foreign oil resources. Nationalism had become a potent force in international politics, so local populations were likely to resist foreign rule, heightening occupation obstacles. In addition, emerg-

ing norms against conquest, plunder, and the forceful resolution of interstate disputes created international obstacles to petroleum grabs, as third parties were increasingly likely to retaliate for these actions.

The physical and political economic characteristics of the oil industry also discouraged imperial adventurism. Petroleum exploration, production, and transportation have always required extensive, expensive physical infrastructure, which can be damaged by military aggression. The oil industry has also persistently relied on access to large amounts of foreign capital, which investors are likely to withhold from conquered territories. Hence, the invasion, occupation, international, and investment obstacles to fighting for petroleum have always been high. Unlike other resource wars, classic oil wars have never paid.

Other characteristics of the modern international system have also discouraged oil grabs. By the beginning of the twentieth century, states had greater technological capacity to develop petroleum substitutes—although, as chapter 7 illustrated, some of them have been more successful at this than others. More importantly, the international economic system has allowed states to buy oil rather than fighting for it. This trading system has been imperfect. The world wars restricted countries' access to oil resources and revenue. So did peacetime trade restrictions, such as the oil embargo imposed by Arab members of OPEC in the 1970s and international sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s. Nonetheless, the market has generally been remarkably effective at satisfying countries' petroleum needs.⁷ Moreover, as the number of oil-producing states has risen, the viability of supply shutoffs—and the legitimacy of oil grabs—has declined even further.⁸ It is increasingly difficult for a government to claim that it had “no other choice” but to seize another country's petroleum resources. Thus, while oil is exceptionally valuable, it is currently unnecessary for states to treat it differently from other commodities. It is quantitatively, not qualitatively, distinct from other natural resources.

Meanwhile, research on other resources suggests that states' reluctance to fight for oil may not be exceptional. Aaron Wolf has found that international “water wars”—another type of resource conflict that figures prominently in popular and academic narratives—are far rarer than most people assume. Between 1918 and 1994, states fought no wars for water and only seven water skirmishes: the conceptual equivalent of oil spats.⁹ This raises another question: If states refrain from wars to acquire the “water of life” and from wars to obtain “the lifeblood of industrially advanced nations,” which natural resources *do* they fight for? Perhaps we have overestimated all resources' contributions to interstate conflict. Scholars should examine this question more closely rather than simply assuming that countries' desire to obtain valuable resources has been—and continues to be—a

significant cause of international conflict. In doing so, they should employ methods that go beyond correlation, so they can determine whether countries actually fought *for* natural resources or merely fought *in* resource-endowed territories.

Moving forward, we should also adopt a more skeptical view toward future resource war claims. Inevitably, countries will confront new resource shortages, and given the Mad Max and El Dorado myths' durability, we should expect these narratives to remain culturally accessible whenever the next crisis emerges. However, we should refrain from assuming that value will automatically lead to violence. States may, in fact, be equally reluctant to fight for other resources.

Believing Dangerously

In the introduction to his resource biography, *The Age of Oil*, Leonardo Maugeri observes that "throughout its history, 'black gold' has given rise to myths and obsessions, fears and misperceptions of reality, and ill-advised policies that have weighed heavily on the world's collective psyche."¹⁰ In addition to the oil wars myth, petroleum has provoked six myths related to the 1973–1974 oil embargo, nine myths associated with the United States' unconventional "oil boom," "myth-making on the Saudi frontier," the "myth of the Caspian 'great game,'" "myths that make Americans worry about oil," the "myth of petroleum independence," and the "myth of the oil crisis."¹¹ Oil apparently encourages mythmaking.

However, while many scholars have identified and challenged oil-related myths, few have attempted to explain why oil is so readily mythologized or why petro-myths are so widely believed. Perhaps people's limited understanding of the physical properties and political economy of oil encourages uncritical acceptance of all kinds of erroneous, petroleum-related claims? Alternatively, does oil's exceptional military and economic utility encourage us to misinterpret its effects? Or have the oil industry's many disreputable activities, dating back to the practices that Ida Tarbell chronicled in her 1904 exposé of Standard Oil, led us to assume that petroleum provokes extravagant and egregious behaviors?¹² Investigating why petro-myths propagate so readily would be a valuable topic for further research.

A more pressing enterprise, however, is to consider the effects of petro-myths generally, and the oil wars myth specifically. As I observed in chapter 2, hegemonic myths shape our thinking, including our interpretations of real-world events and our policy responses. They accomplish this partly through omission. Dominant narratives are, by their nature, exclusive: "a rhetorical razor that defines included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered."¹³ Hence, the oil wars myth inevitably sidelines other stories. By attributing conflicts to countries' petroleum ambitions, we obscure the other issues, interests, and ac-

tors that may be driving them. This process may occur subconsciously, as a result of our psychological tendency to latch onto familiar narratives. Or we may use the oil wars myth to deliberately manipulate.

Actors' strategic deployment of oil war narratives was particularly evident in the Chaco case, presented in chapter 5.¹⁴ Huey P. Long, the Bolivian and Paraguayan governments, and members of the Bolivian opposition all used this storyline to advance their parochial interests: lambasting Standard Oil, attracting international support to their side of the conflict, and undermining the Salamanca regime. The Bolivian people also eventually embraced the narrative to bring order and meaning to a catastrophic and apparently irrational event.¹⁵ Many of these actors knew that the oil war interpretation was false. They reiterated it, nonetheless, because it served their interests.

Civil war researchers have documented a number of negative consequences arising from overreliance on resource war narratives. First, attributing conflicts to belligerents' resource ambitions causes us to overlook other motives for violence, which, in the case of intrastate conflicts, are more nuanced, and often less greedy, than resource war interpretations suggest.¹⁶ Second, resource war narratives can misplace responsibility for violence. For example, in the civil wars literature, the narratives' emphasis on local insurgents encourages us to ignore the broader social, political, and economic structures that incentivize these actors' resource-oriented aggression.¹⁷ Third, overemphasizing resource war narratives leads to inefficient and even counterproductive policy choices, as it leaves other, significant causes of conflict, including larger structural issues, unaddressed.¹⁸

Accordingly, when we hear classic oil war explanations for interstate conflicts, we should ask ourselves, What is this narrative encouraging us to ignore? Whom does it benefit?¹⁹ And which policy choices might it provoke? Notably, an early effort to denaturalize the oil wars myth came from Michael Klare. Twenty years before publishing *Resource Wars*, he asserted that the narrative was merely an invented justification for US naval expansion. As he put it in 1981, "After several decades of uncertain purpose, the navy has finally discovered a rationale for unlimited expansion: the protection of imported raw materials."²⁰

By labeling a conflict a classic oil war, authorities invoke a particular storyline: two states battling for control over petroleum resources. Everything outside of these characters and plot is erased.²¹ This framing empowers national governments, in addition to national military establishments; if countries must fight for petroleum resources, the state will take the lead, possibly resorting to extraordinary measures to obtain or defend petroleum supplies.²² Leaders may also embrace the oil war narrative to bolster their popular support. Although petroleum ambitions invite international censure, they can play well at home, because they imply that the population as a whole will benefit from international aggression,

since captured oil resources and revenue can be redistributed domestically. Emphasizing an oil motive also obscures leaders' more selfish incentives for international aggression, such as inciting a rally-'round-the-flag effect.

Finally, our intellectual commitments to the Mad Max and El Dorado myths limit our understanding of historical interstate conflicts. In the Mad Max myth, "good" actors fight for their survival. In the El Dorado myth, "bad" actors fight to enrich themselves. Where, then, do we put bad actors who believe that they are fighting for their survival, like Iraq in 1990 and Germany and Japan in their World War II oil campaigns? The two hegemonic myths leave no space for that storyline. Consequently, we are faced with the dilemma of either condemning international aggression or correctly interpreting these states' motives for war. To accomplish both tasks, we must first demystify—or "demythify"—classic oil wars.

Evidence of Things Not Seen

This book has found that states avoid classic oil wars. However, this does not mean that they never engage in petroleum-related violence. As other authors have observed, there are many pathways from oil to war, most of which do not involve seizing foreign or contested oil resources.²³ Countries may fight to secure oil transportation routes: a factor that contributed to the Chaco War and both of Iraq's major conflicts, because of the country's concern about its diminutive Persian Gulf coastline. States may also fight to prevent the consolidation of control over global petroleum reserves, as occurred in Operation Desert Storm (1991). In addition, they may pursue regime change in oil-producing countries in order to alter their targets' resource behavior, as the Bush administration may have attempted to do in 2003. In addition, oil-producing countries can engage in petro-aggression: using the opportunities created by their resource revenue to finance attacks on other states.

Within countries, rebels may challenge their governments or launch secessionist conflicts to obtain petroleum resources or revenue. Oil exploitation can also finance intrastate conflicts. Additionally, oil-related violence can transcend the international-domestic divide. Petroleum-related civil wars may spill over into other countries. Foreign governments may finance insurgencies in oil-producing states or intervene directly in these contests in order to support their preferred party. Oil companies may also interfere in civil wars, if they think one belligerent will be better for business.

The good news about classic oil wars is therefore not necessarily good news about other types of oil-related conflicts. The impediments to classic oil wars— invasion, occupation, international, and investment obstacles—apply unevenly, if at all, to other kinds of contention. However, my findings do suggest that these

alternative forms of petro-conflict merit further attention, to evaluate whether and how participants' oil interests actually contribute to violence. Civil war researchers, as well as this book, have already demonstrated that resource war narratives are often overstated. Other pathways from oil to conflict may be equally problematic. The prevalence of petro-myths suggests that, at a minimum, all oil-conflict narratives should be interrogated, not accepted at face value.

Over the Horizon

Do my findings warrant changes in US foreign policy? On the one hand, I have determined that competition over oil resources is not a significant threat to international security. Oil spats will not escalate. Great powers will not fight wars to obtain petroleum resources, even if oil prices rise. Oil-producing countries will not attempt to seize each other's resources. This means that the United States' original purpose for establishing a military presence in the Persian Gulf—deterring oil conquest by local or extraregional states—does not exist. On the other hand, as noted earlier, there are many other types of oil-related contention that could destabilize petroleum-producing countries. While future research may challenge these hypothesized oil-conflict connections, my analysis has revealed that states regularly fight *in* hydrocarbon-endowed territories for reasons unrelated to oil. Hence, we should expect the militarization of oil-producing areas, by international and domestic actors, to remain a regular occurrence.

The question, then, is not whether hydrocarbon-endowed territories will continue to experience violent conflict; they will, even if oil is a marginal motive for contention. The relevant policy questions are, instead, whether these conflicts will endanger global petroleum flows and whether the United States' current policy choices will moderate these disruptions. Examining the US military presence in the Persian Gulf, Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press have answered both questions in the negative. They argue, first, that the international oil market can compensate for most interruptions to resource flows, including those precipitated by violent conflict. Second, the United States' current forward-deployed military posture does not help it deter or respond to the three major threats to regional security: international aggression, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and civil unrest in petroleum-producing states. In fact, the US presence exacerbates the final problem by engendering local grievances.²⁴ My analysis demonstrates that the US military presence also exacerbates the first problem; in 1990, it encouraged Saddam Hussein's oil gambit by strengthening his conviction that the United States was determined to overthrow his regime. My findings therefore reinforce Gholz and Press's conclusion that the United States' interests may be better served

by a more limited Persian Gulf presence or even an over-the-horizon military posture.

The broader policy recommendation that emerges from this book, however, is that decision makers should refocus their attention on other causes of interstate conflict. When we attribute violence to states' petroleum aspirations, we ignore the issues that countries actually fight over: hegemonic ambitions; perceived threats to state survival; disputed territories' other economic, strategic, and symbolic assets; political independence; and national pride. These, not oil, are the factors that fuel major international conflicts.