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Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam and Cali M. Ellis  
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## Introduction

Facing death at the end of an unwinnable war against the combined forces of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, Paraguayan leader Francisco Solano López's reported last words were, "I die for my nation."<sup>1</sup> For Americans, López's sense of self-sacrifice might bring to mind the words of Revolutionary War hero Nathan Hale, whose life ended at the hands of British executioners. Hale's last defiant words, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country!" have inspired subsequent generations of Americans.<sup>2</sup> López's words and image persist as well. His efforts leading his small nation against South America's greatest powers secured him a place in the Paraguayan "Pantheon of Heroes," the building in Asunción where bronze statues memorialize Paraguay's greatest leaders. Almost 150 years after his death at the end of the War of the Triple Alliance in 1870, López remains an idolized figure in Paraguay.

A close examination of Paraguay's domestic and foreign policy under López reveals a country whose course and destiny resulted from the imposition of the preferences and beliefs of just one man. López had nearly complete control over Paraguay's domestic political institutions. The policy decisions he made that led to the annihilation of his people and the destruction of the Paraguayan state demonstrate how the will of a bold leader can shape its population.

In late 1864, under López's rule, Paraguay initiated the War of the Triple Alliance against Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. On December 13 of that year, López declared war against Brazil after a relatively small-scale Brazilian military intervention against Uruguayan farmers who had sought support from Paraguay. The farmers' request for assistance against Brazil's military provided the pretext that López had been waiting for; it was a war López wanted to fight.

<sup>1</sup> He said, "¡Muero por mi Patria!" Frutos 2007.      <sup>2</sup> McCullough 2005, 224.

In response, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay formed the Triple Alliance to confront what they regarded as Paraguayan aggression.<sup>3</sup>

While Paraguay was a relatively powerful country at the time, particularly for its size, the combined material assets of the Triple Alliance far outweighed Paraguay's capabilities. Once mobilized for war, the members of the Triple Alliance were able to crush the Paraguayan military. More than six years of fighting decimated Paraguay, its infrastructure, and its people. The war resulted in the death of almost 60 percent of its population and nine out of every ten males.<sup>4</sup> In the last years of the war, military combatants from Argentina and Brazil were shocked to see Paraguayan women and children as young as twelve years old taking up arms in what had degenerated into an utterly futile fight. Across Paraguay, soldier and civilian alike starved. To get a sense of the devastation the war inflicted on Paraguay, the 25–30 million deaths the Soviet Union suffered in World War II represented roughly 14 percent of the Russian population, proportionately less than a quarter of the losses imposed on Paraguay. Relative to the size of the countries involved, López's war was the most devastating international war of the past three centuries anywhere on earth. In every other war since the signing of the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648, when a war's impending outcome was undeniable, the losing side has sought a settlement or surrendered unconditionally – every losing side except Paraguay.

Many factors explain both the war's path and its consequences, including politics among the Triple Alliance members, the state of Paraguay's economy, and European colonial influence. Ultimately, however, the story of the war is the story of López. What is interesting is not only that López initiated a war against multiple, ultimately far stronger, adversaries, each of whom tried to counsel him against it; many leaders in history have overestimated their country's capabilities or underestimated the power and resolve of their opponents. What defies conventional explanation is that, in the face of certain defeat with a shattered army, López had the opportunity to end the war several times on relatively generous terms and each time chose to continue fighting. Five years into the war with López's military and country in ruins, following a round of clear Brazilian victories, the Brazilian leader Conde d'Eu proposed settlement terms to López. A memoir written by one of López's closest lieutenants describes López's response:<sup>5</sup>

On 23 December of that year (1869), the Marquis de Caxias, with their allies sent a note to the Marshal López, president of Paraguay, in his headquarters in Ytá-Ibaté, requiring the deposition of the weapons of the Republic within 12 hours, thus avoiding useless shedding of more blood, and to take responsibility for this, in case of a refusal to surrender. López answered the summons, "This is the response of a free and independent nation to the enemies of Paraguay. What is the aim of the Triple Alliance with this demand of surrender? Perhaps they are actors in a just war of self-defense of

<sup>3</sup> Whigham 2002.<sup>4</sup> Whigham and Potthast 1999.<sup>5</sup> Resquin 1875.

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unquestionable right. Not a thousand times? The powers of the wicked Triple Alliance from the secret treaty of May 1, 1865, signed in Buenos Aires, have brought this unjust war of usurpation of the territories of Paraguay, and the extermination of their populations, because they never had claim to these territories, despite the questions of the Brazilian and Argentine governments.”<sup>6</sup>

After each round of Paraguayan losses and proffered treaty rejections, the armies of the Triple Alliance advanced further into Paraguayan territory. The area of land under López’s control shrank with each defeat. Still López refused to accept a settlement. The war finally ended at Cerro Corá, in an outpost in northern Paraguay, when the Brazilian army surrounded López and his remaining forces, which were reduced to just 200 soldiers from some sixty thousand at the war’s outset. Defiant until the end, a captured López refused the settlement terms, rejecting Brazil’s demand for surrender by saying, “Therefore I will die with my country!” At this point, the Brazilian army was more than pleased to remove the intransigent dictator. Brazilian soldiers shot and killed López on the spot. A postwar treaty consummated in 1876 carved up Paraguay among the victors. Brazil and Argentina allowed a substantial fraction of the devastated country to retain its independence in order to provide a buffer state between the continent’s two great powers.

What radical thoughts drove López’s behavior? Although we have few letters and no long-term diary, hints from his upbringing point early on toward extreme and messianic autocratic behavior. A young López served in Paraguay’s military when his father ruled as dictator, but he never saw combat. When López was only eighteen years old, his father appointed him a general.<sup>7</sup> Historian James Saeger notes that despite López’s limited experience and lack of formal military training, he sincerely believed his teenage military service had bestowed in him extraordinary “military genius.”<sup>8</sup> This delusional self-image drove much of his strategic thinking. López also lacked much in terms of life experience and perspective, growing up in his father’s shadow in a geographically and socially isolated Paraguay. A trip to Europe in the mid-1850s may have proved critical in the development of his worldview. According to a British citizen who traveled with him, the trip revealed to López the wonder of Europe’s military “parade and glitter.” Just as Europe’s militarists bathed in “false glory and proud memories of wars and warriors,” ultimately leading to decades of increasingly destructive wars that culminated in World War I, López returned from the continent with a keenly romantic sense of what it meant to go to war.<sup>9</sup>

Following his European excursion, López became preoccupied and obsessed with honor and prestige. Once in office, he set out to win a glorious military victory for Paraguay. George Thomson, another English citizen in Paraguay at the time of the war, directly connected López’s personal ambitions for

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.    <sup>7</sup> López 1845.    <sup>8</sup> Saeger 2007, 11.    <sup>9</sup> Masterman 1870, 91.

Paraguay's future through the war, writing that "[he] had an idea that only by having a war could Paraguay become known."<sup>10</sup> In his pursuit of personal and national glory, López repeatedly doubled down at every opportunity. Rather than accepting the ignominy of defeat, he continued to pursue a sense of honor that dictated the course of the war and the utter destruction of his country and people. Our puzzle lies not so much in the explanation of López's behavior as an individual leader; rather, it is whether we must think of leaders such as López as historians do, as idiosyncratic individuals whose personal choices are as inexplicable as they are extreme. Alternatively, can we somehow fit someone like López into a broader pattern, using early life indicators to develop something of a profile by which extreme leaders, both those who seek violence and shun compromise as well as those who prefer to appease aggressors and shirk from violence, are identifiable before the fact?

It is easy to take the role of leaders for granted, seeing them constrained by circumstances, by the international and domestic political contexts in which they operate. Prussian Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck, as responsible as any leader for the rapid rise of Germany to great-power status in the late nineteenth century, once famously stated, "Man cannot create the current of events. He can only float with it and steer."<sup>11</sup> However, many examples seem to suggest otherwise, beginning with American foreign policy in the first few years after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and elsewhere. In 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court delivered an extremely close election victory to Republican candidate George W. Bush over Democratic candidate Al Gore.<sup>12</sup> While any American serving as president of the United States likely would have invaded Afghanistan, as George W. Bush did in 2001, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a different story. Even conservative advocates such as William Kristol referred to the War in Iraq as one of choice. George W. Bush was the one person whose choice it was that ultimately led to war against Iraq in March 2003.<sup>13</sup> Had the U.S. Supreme Court ruled differently and demanded a complete recount of the disputed election returns, which would have placed Al Gore in the presidency rather than Bush, would a President Gore then have done the same? Many think that Gore would have allowed diplomacy with Iraq to play out longer and would have counted on maintenance or tightening of the economic sanctions regime then in place to deter Saddam Hussein.<sup>14</sup> In 2014, few would deny that Vladimir Putin's personal preferences had played a critical role in motivating Russian aggression against Ukraine, from the invasion of the Crimea to Russian support for Ukrainian separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

Going back further in history, while the secession of the Confederacy may have been inevitable, due to the pernicious institution of slavery and a handful of other factors, a devastating civil war was not. Abraham Lincoln's victory in

<sup>10</sup> Thompson 1869, 25.    <sup>11</sup> Lee 1988, 89.    <sup>12</sup> Bruni 2000.    <sup>13</sup> Kagan and Kristol 2004.

<sup>14</sup> There are some who disagree, arguing that the same factors that led Bush to support war against Iraq would have driven a President Gore to declare war as well. See Harvey 2011.

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the hotly contested 1860 election over John Breckinridge triggered the South's move toward secession and Confederacy.<sup>15</sup> Lincoln's leadership of the Union in the war is now the stuff of legend, considered a definitive example of a particular leader's choices bending the arc of history. Lincoln suffered critics on both sides. Liberals bemoaned his draconian policy choices, such as the arrest of the Maryland legislature to bar their vote on secession. Conservative critics felt he dallied after dramatic early losses before pressing the war. Perhaps the turning point in the war, the Emancipation Proclamation, was controversial as well. Lincoln summed up the depth of criticism he faced in an interview when he observed, "If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for want of any other business."<sup>16</sup> One need not stretch one's imagination to believe that were it not for Lincoln, the history of the United States and perhaps democracy worldwide would have been quite different.

Leaders affect national policies in several ways. One of the more obvious is through their decisions about war and peace. Leaders are responsible for calibrating national policy when it comes to a country's grand strategy as well as how to treat particular countries. Leaders are ultimately responsible for their nation's involvement in or avoidance of war. Following the failure of Britain's appeasement policies from 1938 to 1939, Neville Chamberlain resigned as British Prime Minister, acknowledging Leo Amery's and other Conservatives' critiques of the Chamberlain government's policies. Amery, in the House of Commons, notoriously quoted Oliver Cromwell in demanding that Chamberlain step down following the failure of the Norway campaign: "You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!"<sup>17</sup> A short time later, in May 1940, as France was falling to the Germans, it was Winston Churchill who outmaneuvered Halifax and the Liberals on the British War Committee and, by carrying the day, committed the British to a total war against the Germans rather than settling for what Churchill viewed as a humiliating bargain.<sup>18</sup>

Leadership of the Lincoln or Churchill type is not restricted to democratic states nor great victories, either. While there is an enormous literature describing the role that Germany's offensive military doctrine played in the escalation of the crisis leading to World War I,<sup>19</sup> Germany's military policy flowed from the top. Kaiser Wilhelm II authorized the rapid mobilization strategy that helped lead to the rapid escalation of the July 1914 crisis. The Kaiser also made the final decision to mobilize the German army in the days following the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand.<sup>20</sup> Kaiser Wilhelm II fits the profile of a leader predisposed to aggression, with a background that included military service – but not combat experience; it taught him to trust his expertise and

<sup>15</sup> McPherson 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Burlingame 1987, 193.

<sup>17</sup> Louis 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Lukas 1991.

<sup>19</sup> Van Evera 1984.

<sup>20</sup> Mommsen 1990.

instincts as a military grand strategist but did not give him experience in the horrific downsides of war.<sup>21</sup> Along with childhood experiences that predisposed him toward risk-taking and insecurity fueled by resentment of his peers,<sup>22</sup> Kaiser Wilhelm II illustrates well one of the kinds of leaders most likely to initiate and escalate international conflict.

Leaders also make critical decisions such as whether to pursue key military technologies that carry long-term security implications. For example, chief executives' policy preferences play an outsized role in the decision to start or terminate a state's nuclear weapons program. Prior experiences in rebel and revolutionary movements make leaders more likely to pursue nuclear weapons than one might expect.<sup>23</sup> Leaders with prior rebel experience are acutely aware of how tenuous their hold on government is and even of the contingency of national sovereignty. This has made leaders from Charles de Gaulle to David Ben-Gurion to Fidel Castro to Saddam Hussein more likely to favor acquiring nuclear weapons. In each case, these leaders saw in nuclear weapons a technological fix they believed could secure their countries from invasion.<sup>24</sup>

China's pursuit of nuclear weapons under Mao Zedong provides a clear example of the link between success as a rebel leader and nuclear proliferation. One of Mao's top priorities when he entered office was avoiding the humiliation at the hands of outsiders that had plagued China since the nineteenth century. Mao, recognizing China's weakness compared with the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, did not want China again to fall hostage to the politics of the other great powers.<sup>25</sup> His prior experiences as a rebel, leading the Chinese Communists to victory against the nationalists and the Kuomintang in the Chinese Civil War, shaped his perspective on accomplishing his goal.<sup>26</sup> Without nuclear weapons, Mao worried that China would have to "kneel and obey orders meekly, as if they were nuclear slaves"<sup>27</sup> and that, since China did not have nuclear weapons, "others don't think what we say carries weight."<sup>28</sup> Independently of China's security concerns, which stemmed from the war against the United States in Korea and other crises in the region, especially over Taiwan, his prior experiences predisposed Mao to seek nuclear weapons.

Political executives also have responsibility for indirect influence over lower-level policies as well. Leaders typically select or approve the appointment of

<sup>21</sup> Lebow 1981.    <sup>22</sup> Ibid.    <sup>23</sup> Fuhrmann and Horowitz 2015.

<sup>24</sup> For more on nuclear proliferation, see Sagan and Waltz 1995; Singh and Way 2004; Gartzke and Jo 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy 2011, 119–22. See also Miller 2013a; Miller 2013b.

<sup>26</sup> This overall story is drawn in large part from Fuhrmann and Horowitz 2015. For more on Mao's rebel experience and how it shaped his worldview, see Schwartz 1951; Rice 1972; Goldstein 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Krepon 2009, 101.    <sup>28</sup> Lewis and Xue 1988, 36.

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Harry Truman at the White House.

Source: Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

their cabinet officials and other key officials. Decisions made by those officials trace back to the leader.<sup>29</sup> U.S. President Harry S. Truman explicitly recognized this by placing a sign on his desk in the oval office plainly stating, “The buck stops here.”

While leaders bear direct responsibility for the policy choices they make, domestic political institutions also constrain the head of state when in office. Franklin Roosevelt in 1940 faced greater constraints in pursuing his preferred domestic policy of conscription and increasing the size of the U.S. Army than Hitler had in the early 1930s. Different types of political systems have more or fewer bureaucratic obstacles or veto points that prevent a leader from simply enacting his or her will. There are limits to the autonomy of any leader. Even the most authoritarian leaders, such as the Soviet Union’s totalitarian leader Joseph Stalin or Iraq’s Baathist President Saddam Hussein, are responsible to a selectorate, a group of people whose support is critical for the leader to remain in power.<sup>30</sup> If a leader strays too far from the policy preferences of

<sup>29</sup> In the United States, cabinet officials are appointed by the President and must be approved by Congress. While Congress sometimes blocks nominees (and with increasing frequency), the President generally has discretion on these selections.

<sup>30</sup> Tsebelis 1995.



the selectorate, the selectorate may rebel and try to remove the leader from office through a coup or other means.<sup>31</sup> During World War II, as the fighting on the Eastern front devolved into a horrifying war of attrition that Germany was bound to lose, Hitler's own officers made multiple assassination attempts. In Egypt in 2012, Hosni Mubarak lost the support of his military and stepped down in the face of rising antigovernment sentiment.<sup>32</sup>

#### WHY STUDY LEADER EXPERIENCES?

While common sense tells us that leaders play a crucial role in setting their state's course, sorting out in a systematic manner what explains how leaders will behave is more difficult. New research in behavioral psychology, however, suggests that individuals' early experiences profoundly shape their choices later in their lives.<sup>33</sup> This is consistent with thinking about leaders in the context of political campaigns. In the United States, for example, in every election cycle, the background experiences of American presidential candidates provide fertile ground for debate among the media, public, and the politicians themselves. Politicians point to their own past experiences as evidence of special competence and indicators of the policies they are likely to adopt once in office. In turn, the media picks through the backgrounds of candidates with a fine-toothed comb, searching for prior experiences that will shed light on the quality of decisions a candidate might make in office. In the 2008 election cycle in the United States, news sources focused on the church that then-candidate Barack Obama had attended, the pastor's sermons, and what they might mean for Obama's social policies once in office. Much was made of Obama's parents' divorce and the fact that he had been raised by a single mother. His foreign travels as a young man convinced some observers that he would have some special competence in foreign policy if elected. In comparison, some commentators focused on Obama's lack of military service and highlighted Senator John McCain's record as a Navy aviation veteran and prisoner-of-war survivor and wondered whether that suggested Obama was too weak, too inexperienced, or both for the job of being Commander-in-Chief.<sup>34</sup> In 2012, when Mitt Romney represented the Republican Party in the American presidential election, both his campaign and his supporters focused on his business background as an indicator of great managerial competence. Some detractors focused on his Mormon faith, claiming his adherence to a religion out of the mainstream made him suspect.

Four years before President Obama's first victory, the backgrounds of the candidates featured prominently in the campaign. The sitting President, George W. Bush, had served in the Texas Air National Guard but never in

<sup>31</sup> Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Chiozza and Goemans 2011. <sup>32</sup> Kirkpatrick 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Kolb 1984; Roberts et al. 2003; Xue et al. 2010; Wood et al. 2013. <sup>34</sup> Press 2008.



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a combat role.<sup>35</sup> His opponent, John Kerry, was a decorated combat veteran who had served in the Vietnam War. In a series of interviews, speeches, and columns, Kerry and his handlers explicitly suggested that his combat experience in Vietnam provided him with experiences that would make him a more effective wartime president than George W. Bush. During his speech in Boston accepting the Democratic Party's nomination to be their presidential candidate, Kerry even stated, "As President, I will wage this war with the lessons I learned in war."<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, the relevance of leader backgrounds is not simply limited to evaluating leaders during political campaigns. For example, after the September 11 attacks, as the U.S. government began considering its short- and long-term response strategy, according to one account, President George W. Bush's background came to the fore. In an interview with the television network CNN ten years later, the pilot of Air Force One that day, Colonel Mark Tillman, stated that George W. Bush's military background drove his reaction to the 9/11 attacks. Tillman said, "I saw a leader in action. In my mind, a military man. He had been trained in the military as well. He was able to make a lot of decisions . . . He was executing as a military man would do and make decisions right on the fly."<sup>37</sup> Bush's checkered past, including his limited military experience, had been an issue on the campaign trail during the 2000 presidential campaign.<sup>38</sup> Yet even that limited military experience, according to Colonel Tillman, shaped the way that Bush responded.

While several of these examples come from the United States, this is not a uniquely American phenomenon, nor is it one restricted to democratic states. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, did not serve in the Red Army but received graduate education in engineering. Commentators in the Chinese press focused on his background as an engineer and what it might suggest about his viewpoint on China's economic and political trajectory.<sup>39</sup> When he visited the United States in 2011, members of the American media wondered how his trip to Iowa as a younger man had shaped his view of the United States and what that could mean for United States–China relations.<sup>40</sup>

The cover of this book highlights another leader whose early experiences shaped his later behaviour: Winston Churchill. A young Churchill attended Sandhurst Military Academy, fought in the Battle of Omdurman, went abroad as a war correspondent, and was first elected to Parliament in 1900. He described these experiences as critical to his worldview, stating, "I felt as if I were walking with Destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial."<sup>41</sup> His experience promoting air power in World War I also shaped his perspective when he became a leader, encouraging his strong advocacy of air bombing by the British in World War II.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Rimer 2004. <sup>36</sup> Kerry 2004. <sup>37</sup> Crowley 2011. <sup>38</sup> Kristof 2000.

<sup>39</sup> *Economist* 2010. <sup>40</sup> Johnson 2012. <sup>41</sup> Churchill 1948, 601. <sup>42</sup> Overy 1995, 267.

In 2003, commentators discussing French opposition to the American-led invasion of Iraq argued that French President Jacques Chirac's military service in Algeria powerfully influenced the way he estimated and weighed the costs and benefits of armed conflict. Chirac himself even stated that his experiences in Algeria made him especially aware of the risks involved in a conflict such as the Iraq war.<sup>43</sup>

Background experiences matter in part because they form a mental Rolodex that both citizens and leaders turn to when making strategic decisions in the future.<sup>44</sup> Behavioral psychologists have long noted that humans tend to reason by analogy. When confronted with a difficult decision, we tend to look for a case or set of circumstances in the past that appears to be similar to the situation at hand and that might provide guidance for the current situation. Personal experiences provide particularly powerful "lessons of history." Compared with many domestic policy choices, international institutions provide relatively weak constraints compared with the rules and legal frameworks that shape executives' decisions regarding domestic policy. Moreover, leaders tend to face greater uncertainty and more incomplete information when coming to foreign-policy decisions compared with domestic ones, making heuristics based on past events particularly important. Background experiences represent a pool of lessons learned, shaping a leader's judgment about which strategies are more or less likely to succeed or fail. This means background experiences could shape leader personalities in ways that influence whether they attempt to act as transformational or transactional leaders.<sup>45</sup>

This is especially true for more poignant and intense experiences, and leaders are more likely to rely on them again later in life.<sup>46</sup> Both cognitive and behavioral psychologists note that intense or traumatic events, particularly early in life, shape adults' personalities and individual attitudes toward risk and rewards. On average, people who successfully pursue actions that the public would view as highly risky are more likely to try them again. It is not just that some people are inclined, for example, to think that bungee jumping is a great idea while others think it is extremely dangerous.<sup>47</sup> It is also that those who go bungee jumping or sky diving are more likely to think that those sorts of activities are worthwhile and that they are good at them. Similarly, those who participate in and survive a revolutionary war, such as Mao Zedong or David Ben-Gurion, are likely to emerge with beliefs that violence can solve political dilemmas. Those on the losing side of such wars often conclude the opposite. Background experiences, therefore, provide crucial markers to help predict which leaders are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior on the international scene and which are not. But how do we sustain this claim?

<sup>43</sup> Starobin 2003.      <sup>44</sup> Khong 1992; Goldgeier 1994; Kennedy 2011.      <sup>45</sup> Nye 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Jervis 1988; Goldgeier 1994, 2; Simonin 1999; Wood et al. 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Gardner and Steinberg 2005; Cutchin et al. 2008.