The future in the past: Victory, defeat, and grand strategy in the US, UK, France and Germany

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The Future in the Past: Victory, Defeat, and Grand Strategy in the US, UK, France and Germany

This book argues that victory and defeat in war shape the post-war grand strategies of states, specifically their use of military force and diplomacy. It focuses on the experiences of the belligerent states of the Second World War, and in particular on those of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. To explore the argument, the book utilises regression analysis, historical analysis, counterfactual thought experiments, content analysis of documents, and a series of fifty interviews with American, British, French, and German policymakers.

The findings show that victory increases the propensity of states to use force and decreases their propensity to use diplomacy, while defeat fosters the opposite. Experiences with war also shape the types of military capabilities and alliances that policymakers prefer, and their perception of threats. Finally, victory strengthens the legitimacy and influence of policymakers, while defeat constrains them, thereby reinforcing the lessons drawn from war.

Together, the three effects of victory and defeat establish enduring patterns of national strategic behaviour that continue to define transatlantic relations.
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Paul van Hooft
The Future in the Past:
Victory, Defeat, and Grand Strategy
in the US, UK, France and Germany

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Foreword

A few words of thanks are due to the people who through their collegiality, their friendship, or their love made it possible for me to conceive, research, and write this book.

To begin with, the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) and the Political Economy and Transnational Governance (PETGOV) programme group have generously enabled me to complete a project that was close to my heart for a long time. They funded the research, training, conferences, and my travels to conduct interviews. But they did not only enable the creation of the this book in this most literal sense, the PETGOV group also helped my overall development as a researcher and an academic through academic exchanges. I would also like to thank all the regular attendees of the RISC discussion group for being generous with their time.

The project would not have existed without Brian and the crucial role he played as my promoter. Brian has seen every stage of this project: from the original embryonic ideas formulated during his classes; to my Master's thesis; to the applications I wrote; and, finally, through all the steps of the actual dissertation. I first met Brian in his American foreign policy class, which, together with his class on US-European relations, proved to have a profound impact on the direction of my life. He made an impression on my younger self, not only for his passion for teaching and for dissecting arguments, but also for not accepting anything less than my very best. I hope this book represents such an effort for him.

The list of people who offered advice and criticism while I was writing the dissertation is long. Andrea played a substantial role in sharpening the dissertation’s argument. I would like to thank him for his collegial and pragmatic attitude as well as his personal support, both of which were key to completing the book. Annette was there from the start of my dissertation, in the Methodology Clinic she teaches with Brian, the IPE group, PETGOV, and later the RISC group. In all these cases, she impressed me with her astute and sharp critiques, and her attention to details. These have, I hope, significantly improved my thinking and work. More memorably, however, Annette impressed me with her great kindness and supportive attitude. In that sense, she is a model for what academics should aspire to be, and one that I am grateful to have encountered. Geoffrey has also long been a part of my academic involvement: when I was doing undergraduate studies long ago, then through the past few years, as I was completing my dissertation. Through it all he has been kind and supporting, and has displayed an impressive knowledge of history and overpriced alcohol. Chris was kind enough to meet me and discuss my ideas at a time when I very much needed to do so. He was encouraging beyond what could be expected and has remained so since then. For this I was and am very grateful.

Wolfgang has been supportive of my work since I met him, which I thank him for. However, besides a shared interest in all the serious stuff on national security institutions and constraints on military force, I was also happy to have found someone to talk indie rock with.

Other people played direct roles in the dissertation and in the practical details of the defence. I thank Uli for standing next to me at the defence, and for his friendship through the past years. I also appreciate his patience in explaining to me how ministerial politics actually work. I consequently forgive him for his lack of knowledge of movie, music, or any other popcultural points of reference. Mike is also kind enough to stand next to me at the defence. I salute him for that, and for his great humour and appreciation of the bizarre, as well as his commitment to
outdoor BBQ, even in Dutch weather conditions. Michal gave great advice and comments on my work. He was a welcome voice of sanity to talk to about contemporary political developments, where he offered true insight and dark humour. We bonded over a mutual love for red meat and realism, and started the first of what I hope will be many collaborations. Great thanks also go to Stephan for his kind help in connecting me to many of the interviewees. I have learned more from actively disagreeing with him than from almost anyone else. More generally, I need to thank the many interviewees who made room in their busy schedules to talk to me, and who then often brought me in contact with others who could help me complete the picture for the research.

My thanks also go to a long list of friends. Rutger, Alex S., and Tarik I thank for their decades of friendship, and for their reluctant interest in what I was doing these past years; Chas – yes, I know, Bill Hicks is from Texas; Mihai - for entertaining me with the latest conspiracy theories you discovered in your fieldwork; Alex V. - that your own late night sessions may soon finish. I would furthermore like to thank in no particular order the many others who were there for most of the trip: Roman E.; Roman G.; Frank; Richard; Marten; Mathijs; Marii; Thijs; Joep; Jerry; Nynke; Maaike; Basje; Luc. Ursula, Julia, Lee, Falk, Jeroen, Daphne; Marc; Elmar; Lutz; Jasper; Sander; Jesse; Francisca; Benno; to my former officemates, Sarah, Julia, and Agnieszka for showing me that there are no limits to how much tea a human body can contain; as well as the students whose enthusiasm for my work motivated me, and specifically: Jort; Raphael; and Alexandra; as well as the members of the administrative staff – like Helena – who helped with important but distracting tasks at moments when it was most needed.

Most of my thanks, however, must go to my family.

Foremost, I would like to thank my mother, Gerda, for giving me the best example anyone could give her son with her calm and pragmatic optimism and for showing me that nothing gets done without hard work. She is one of the people who quietly, without asking for any credit, gets thing done and makes it possible for others to excel. She has certainly made it possible for me to do so, and I cannot thank her enough for that. Her husband, Joost, has always done his best to help with the pragmatic parts of life that easily get overshadowed by a long-term project. I appreciate his help and support tremendously. I would like to thank my father, Leo, for filling me with history since I was a kid. Beyond giving me a head start with this project, it has given me an appreciation of causes and effects, and for how the past lives on in the present. I hope I have also received some of his storytelling abilities to bring it all to life.

Finally, I must thank Valentina. She has been by my side for the duration of the dissertation, giving off constant waves of positivity (‘It will be good, in fact, it will be fantastic!’), offering great solutions to practical and analytical problems, and, should those fail, suggesting good food as the solution. I thank her for that, and for putting up with the strange hours (though she has had her share over the past years), and with my long-winded dissections of American and European history. I would also like to thank her family – Antonio, Miriam, and Fabio – for the affection and hospitality they have shown me. Vale, I think we will finally have some time for ourselves, I am looking forward to it!
Another kind of closing word is also in order. The project was a difficult one to finish, as by their nature dissertations often are. They have the tendency to develop and morph into something beyond the original research proposal, though most of the time this is arguably a good thing. This dissertation was no exception to that rule. However, the dissertation often daunted me due to the inherent darkness of the topic and of the material. In order to make the argument I made, an argument that I think is important, the analysis largely removed the human reality that lies underneath the facts and figures. This troubled me from the start and continues to do so. Yet, there is a point to be made here about the need to look dispassionately at war and strategy. As horrible as war is, and though we should never forget its price is ultimately paid by individual humans and not by aggregate concepts, we cannot close our eyes to their causes, both reasonable and unreasonable, and treat wars as aberrations. Uncomfortable as it may be, we must accept how deeply past wars are interwoven in our thinking and in the fabric of society and our domestic institutions, if we truly care about not living through similar periods of history again. I hope this work contributes something to that.
Chapter One. Introduction

Three sets of claims .................................................................................................................................................... 5
Victory and defeat ....................................................................................................................................................... 7
The cases....................................................................................................................................................................... 9
Four puzzles of American, British, French and German strategy ....................................................................... 10
From historical analysis to broader theory ........................................................................................................... 12
Methodological approach ........................................................................................................................................ 14
Plan of the book........................................................................................................................................................ 15

Chapter Two. Legacies of War, Origins of Grand Strategy

Literature on the legacies of war ............................................................................................................................ 20
Literature on the origins of grand strategy ........................................................................................................... 30
The argument: experience driven realism............................................................................................................. 40
The two major theoretical contributions of the book ....................................................................................... 52
Research design ......................................................................................................................................................... 53


Difficulties in testing the war-weariness thesis .................................................................................................... 59
The Second World War: a critical case of total war ........................................................................................... 62
Independent variables: index of loss and index of defeat ................................................................................. 64
Dependent variables: military force and diplomacy ........................................................................................... 67
Results of the regression analysis: Loss and defeat to force and diplomacy ................................................. 71
Conclusion.................................................................................................................................................................. 78

Chapter Four. Strategic Beliefs, Domestic Relations: the United States and Germany

Histories: American and German grand strategy............................................................................................. 81
Beliefs and relations: the US and Germany ......................................................................................................... 90
United States .............................................................................................................................................................. 90
Germany (FRG to 1990) .......................................................................................................................................105
Conclusion................................................................................................................................................................116

Chapter Five. Strategic Beliefs, Domestic Relations: the United Kingdom and France

Histories: British and French grand strategy ...................................................................................................... 120
Beliefs and relations: the UK and France ........................................................................................................... 125
United Kingdom .....................................................................................................................................................126
France ....................................................................................................................................................................140
Conclusion................................................................................................................................................................157