INTRODUCTION

In 1969, two member states of the Central American Common Market (CACM) went to war. El Salvador launched an undeclared assault on Honduras on July 14. The conflict lasted one hundred hours, ending with a ceasefire orchestrated by the Organization of American States (OAS) on July 18. The final tally of destruction included an estimated 2,000 battle deaths, 6,000 wounded, between 50,000 and 100,000 rendered homeless, and the near collapse of the CACM, which was until then “one of the most successful movements for integration of regional economies.” No formal peace treaty was signed until 1980. Two poor Central American nations, both of which were engaged in a successful economic integration scheme and unprepared for conflict, resorted to war despite serious economic and military limitations. Why?

This conflict is commonly known as the Soccer War. The actual causes of the war were not soccer matches, as numerous journalists and Westerners believed. “Smart-aleck gringo journalists dubbed the conflict the “Soccer War” because its outbreak came on the heels of stadium riots during El Salvador- vs-Honduras World Cup playoffs.” Nationalism, overpopulation, and land monopolization have been cited as factors that explain El Salvador’s use of force. Each theory is supported by historical evidence. The objective of this paper is to determine which theory has the greatest explanatory power.

The nationalism theory argues that crimes committed by Salvadorans and Hondurans against each other in 1969 led to strong nationalism in each country, leading El Salvador to attack Honduras to defend national honor and gain national prestige. This theory explains only

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part of El Salvador’s motivation to attack because it does not consider the long-term resource scarcity in El Salvador. The overpopulation theory argues that high population growth led to resource scarcity in El Salvador, which led 300,000 Salvadorans to migrate to Honduras. El Salvador attacked Honduras in order to prevent the forced return of these migrants because El Salvador lacked the resources to feed them. This theory incorrectly uses overpopulation as the primary cause of resource scarcity in El Salvador. The land monopolization theory argues that high inequality in land ownership in El Salvador created artificial resource scarcity in that country. Artificial resource scarcity caused 300,000 Salvadorans to migrate to Honduras and El Salvador used force because domestic politics prevented land redistribution and the country did not have the resources to feed the migrants as a result.

In this paper, I first present the problem of the 300,000 Salvadoran migrants residing in Honduras at the time of the conflict and place it in a broader theoretical context. I then outline each theory and provide predictions for what would have been observed in the build-up to the Soccer War if they were the primary cause of war, with an emphasis on the question of the Salvadoran migrants. I then survey the evidence and find that the land monopolization theory best explains the Soccer War, while the nationalism and overpopulation theories provide secondary causes. I conclude with a discussion of generalizable findings derived from this analysis for interstate war.

ON SALVADORAN MIGRANTS AND THE MATTER OF THEIR RETURN

By 1969, 300,000 Salvadoran migrants had come to reside in Honduras, representing roughly 10 percent of the population of El Salvador5 and 12.5 percent of the population of

5 Durham, 163.
Honduras.\(^6\) It is important to question what about their return was intolerable for El Salvador, the aggressor in the Soccer War. When the expulsions began in large numbers in June 1969, El Salvador sealed its border with Honduras. As they continued, El Salvador launched a surprise attack on Honduras.\(^7\) Even during the war, the question of the migrants was a prominent issue, even if little understood outside of Central America. The *New York Times* noted that while there had been border skirmishes between the two countries for years, “a more important source of friction has been the migration over many years of perhaps 300,000 Salvadorans from their own incredibly crowded country to sparsely populated Honduras.”\(^8\) Each of the competing theories contends that the expulsion of Salvadoran migrants from Honduran territory played a critical role in the sparking of hostilities. This “issue is widely viewed as the key issue behind the Soccer War”\(^9\) and is seen by many scholars as “the principal source of contention” between the two countries.\(^10\)

Most international migration occurs from one developing nation to another. Such migration can usually be attributed to political factors in the origin country. The larger the influx of migrants to a country, the greater the threat that country faces. While Myron Weiner identifies five separate types of threats, the threat of social or economic burden is the most applicable to the Soccer War. This burden is greater when the migrants are poor and strain the social services and economic resources of recipient countries.\(^11\) Both scholars and the Salvadoran and Honduran governments report that the 300,000 migrants were largely from the lowest socioeconomic class

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\(^6\) Durham, 2.
\(^7\) Durham, 2.
\(^9\) Durham, 2.
in El Salvador.\textsuperscript{12} Tolerance toward the immigration of what are perceived as excess populations of burdensome poor people is also typically low in recipient countries.\textsuperscript{13} This was true for Honduras in the 1960s. The country was ill-equipped to handle the large influx of Salvadoran migrants, with a GDP two-thirds the size of El Salvador’s by 1965.\textsuperscript{14} Weiner offers three possible solutions to unwanted migrants: assist the origin country in resolving the issues that led to migration in the first place, put diplomatic pressure upon the origin country, or use force to either remove the migrants or to compel the origin country to curb migration.\textsuperscript{15} Honduras chose to forcibly evict the Salvadoran migrants, at times in a brutal fashion.\textsuperscript{16}

Migration itself was not the primary cause of the Soccer War. It was El Salvador’s refusal to countenance the return of the migrants that resulted in war. El Salvador rebuffed all attempts at diplomacy, instead launching a surprise attack. This intolerance for the return of the migrants is an intervening variable that all three leading theories agree upon. Finding the primary cause of the Soccer War would explain what caused El Salvador’s decision to initiate a war in response to the expulsion of the migrants. Each of the theories of the primary cause of war provides a variable that could explain El Salvador’s intolerance for the return of Salvadoran migrants. In determining the primary cause it is then necessary to include predictions that relate to the intervening variable. See Figure 1 for the causal chain of the Soccer War.

\textsuperscript{12} Durham, 127.
\textsuperscript{13} Weiner.
\textsuperscript{15} Weiner.
\textsuperscript{16} Bachmura.
Theories and Predictions of the Primary Cause of the Soccer War

Nationalism has often been cited as a cause of interstate war. I use a modified form of a definition of nationalism provided by Rupert Emerson and Richard Cottam. They define it as “a belief on the part of a large group of people that they comprise a community, a nation, that is entitled to independent statehood, and a willingness of this group to grant their community a primary and terminal loyalty.” To this definition I add that this perceived community is an integral component of the identity of each individual in the group. Thus if the community is threatened or offended, so is the individual.

Stephen Van Evera provides a series of hypotheses that predict how nationalism causes war under a variety of circumstances. He offers two hypotheses regarding political/environmental factors and perceptual factors that are relevant to the Soccer War. The

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political/environmental factors hypothesis states that “the greater the past crimes committed by nationalities toward one another, the greater the risk of war.”\textsuperscript{18} Corollaries of this hypothesis include increased risk of war as a result of remembrance of crimes, enduring group responsibility, and a lack of repentance by the perpetrator. The perceptual hypothesis argues that “the more divergent are the beliefs of nationalities about their mutual histories and their current conduct and character, the greater the risk of war”.\textsuperscript{19} Corollaries of this hypothesis include increased risk of war as a result of large demands placed upon the citizenry by the government, poor economic conditions, and weak independent, evaluative institutions. Table 1 reproduces Van Evera’s hypotheses in full.

Table 1. Stephen Van Evera’s Nationalism Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political/Environmental Factors</th>
<th>Perceptual Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The greater the past crimes committed by nationalities toward one another, the greater the risk of war.</td>
<td>2. The more divergent are the beliefs of nationalities about their mutual histories and their current conduct and character, the greater the risk of war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The better these crimes are remembered by the victims, the greater the risk of war.</td>
<td>a. The more the state must demand of its citizens, the greater its propensity to purvey nationalist beliefs, hence the greater the risk of war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. The more responsibility for past crimes can be attached to groups still on the scene, the greater the risk of war.</td>
<td>b. If economic conditions deteriorate, publics become more receptive to scapegoat myths, hence such myths are more widely believed, hence war is more likely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. The less contrition and repentance shown by the guilty groups, the greater the risk of war.</td>
<td>c. If independent, evaluative institutions are weak or incompetent, myths will more often prevail, hence war is more likely.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{18} Van Evera, 1994.
\textsuperscript{19} Van Evera, 1994
In the case of the Soccer War, nationalism was pervasive following riots that took place after the first of two World Cup qualifying matches in June and early July of 1969, weeks before the outbreak of the war. If nationalist sentiment were the primary cause of war, the occurrence of crimes against individuals identifying themselves as of Salvadoran nationality by individuals identifying themselves as of Honduran nationality, and vice versa, would likely be observed. There would likely be collective blame assigned by one or both sides, extensive media coverage of alleged offenses, and discussion among Salvadoran political leaders about national honor and prestige motivating military decisions. There would be a lack of repentance by each side and few dissenting opinions in public discussions, especially in media. Strong demands placed upon the citizenry and deteriorating economic conditions in El Salvador would also increase nationalism and the likelihood of war. In terms of the migrant question, crimes would have been committed or perceived to have been committed against the 300,000 migrants in Honduras by Hondurans, their expulsion would have been seen as illegal by El Salvador, Hondurans would see the presence of the migrants as a crime offensive to Honduras, and neither side would have repented for actions related to migrants.

The second theory for the causes of the Soccer War is that of overpopulation. This theory stems from a Neo-Malthusian school of thought regarding the causes of war. T. R. Malthus’s basic argument was that “the power of population to grow was “indefinitely greater” than the power of the earth to produce subsistence.”20 Neo-Malthusians view population growth as the source of many of mankind’s problems and “the most pressing political-economic problem of our time.”21 As it relates to war, the argument is that in modern society, positive checks on population, such as disease and famine, have largely been mitigated. Population growth,

particularly in developing countries, is rapid. This population growth places pressure on
economic and social structures and reduces the availability of national resources. Nations must
seek to accommodate their burgeoning populations. “Resort to arms is the only positive check
left to meet and adjust economic pressure according to Neo-Malthusian theory” and “war, then,
is not merely a possibility of economic pressure, but is in the nature of an economic certainty.”

In examining this theory, attention must be focused on the aggressor in the Soccer War,
El Salvador. The logic of Neo-Malthusianism dictates that a country facing significant
overpopulation would act to rectify the problem and alleviate the pressures of excess population
through war. High population growth and population density were present in El Salvador in the
in the 1960s. If overpopulation was the primary cause of the Soccer War, high population
growth, high population density, insufficient domestic food production, low socioeconomic
indicators, high landlessness, and discussions among government leaders of overpopulation as a
significant national issue and as a motivation for military action would be observed in El
Salvador. The conclusion that El Salvador could not support its population with the national
resources it possessed at the time of war must be strongly supported. In line with this theory,
overpopulation would have been a primary motivation for the Salvadorans leaving El Salvador.
Consequently, El Salvador’s leaders would view the return of the migrants as a threat to El
Salvador, on the grounds that they could not be adequately supported and would strain El
Salvador’s resources.

The final theory is that of land monopolization, which borrows from theories of war
involving environmental decline. This school of thought holds that changes in the environment
of a given territory may lead to adverse social effects such as reduced agricultural output,
economic decline, population displacement, and the disruption of regular and legitimized social

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practices. These effects in turn cause social tension, which may lead to intra- or interstate conflict. The environmental change prompting such social tension may be naturally occurring or anthropomorphic.²³ The key mechanism that translates environmental change into conflict is the increase in social tension resulting from declining resource availability. The land monopolization theory focuses on anthropomorphic environmental decline. Mismanagement of resources led to artificial resource scarcity and ultimately war.

“Agriculture is the main source of income, jobs, and government revenue in Central America.”²⁴ When arable land is misused, the consequences are significant. The importance of agriculture in Central America has led many scholars to the following conclusion: “What is at the root of Central America’s war and crisis? The answer can be summed up in a single word: land.”²⁵ John Weeks states that “the ownership and distribution of land is the primary political issue in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.”²⁶ The land monopolization theory maintains that extreme land inequality in El Salvador led to a situation in which resources became scarce, social tensions rose dramatically, and war became highly likely.

If this theory of land monopolization leading to artificial environmental decline is the primary cause of the Soccer War, massive inequality in land ownership, high rates of landlessness, the domination of non-subsistence agriculture, an artificial decline in food production, social unrest related to landlessness, and the political dominance of wealthy landowners would likely be observed in El Salvador. The return of the migrants would be intolerable for El Salvador because of its artificial inability to accommodate them. Government leaders would likely highlight the inability of the nation to handle the influx, the threat the

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²⁵ Weinberg, 5.
²⁶ Weeks, 34.
migrants’ return posed to the country, the artificial nature of the land crisis in their discussions, and domestic political constraints related to their ability to alleviate the land crisis. The threat to El Salvador would be viewed as significant enough to warrant military action.

**Evidence and the Primary Cause of the Soccer War**

Even strong opponents of the Neo-Malthusian theory admit that, “at first glance, El Salvador does appear to provide an excellent argument for the Malthusian model of resource scarcity.”

El Salvador has a land area of approximately 8,000 square miles and is roughly one-sixth the size of Honduras, which has a land area of approximately 43,000 square miles. In 1969, El Salvador had a population of 3.3 million—more than twice the population of 1.5 million in Honduras. From 1930 to 1961, the population of El Salvador almost doubled from 1.4 million to 2.5 million. Throughout the 1960s, the average annual growth rate of the population was 3.5 percent.

El Salvador at the time of the Soccer War was the most densely populated country in the Western Hemisphere, with a population density in 1968 of 403 people per square mile, greater than that of India at the time.

In 1969, the population density of arable land alone was 782 people per square mile, compared to only 155 in Honduras.

To feed this rapidly expanding population in a country with limited arable land, food imports into El Salvador doubled between 1952 and 1962. Both El Salvador and Honduras were identified by the United Nations in the late 1960s as “food priority countries” due to their low average incomes, projected shortfalls in cereal production, and massive nutritional deficits.

It seemed logical to many that El Salvador was outstripping its available resources through rapid growth.

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27 Durham, 21.
28 Betters et al, 50.
29 Betters et al, 50.
30 Durham, 6.
31 Ehrlich, 311.
population growth and that the Soccer War had highlighted the country’s “basic problem of overpopulation.” Paul Ehrlich argues that the 300,000 Salvadorans migrated “because of the population pressure” in El Salvador.

In a frequently cited 1976 Environmental Fund statement, leading population experts asserted that “world food production cannot keep pace with the galloping growth of population…Population growth has pushed the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America onto lands which are only marginally suitable for agriculture.” Such sentiments seemed to reflect public opinion at the time as well. A letter to the editor published in the New York Times following the Soccer War asked, “How many more conflicts will result from the population crush?” The overpopulation theory maintains that El Salvador could not accommodate the return of the migrants because the same food and land shortages that had prompted their exit were still occurring. After further examination, however, overpopulation theory loses explanatory power.

The overpopulation theory only serves as a secondary cause of the Soccer War. Overpopulation exacerbated the adverse social effects of land monopolization, but did not instigate war. Given that “the Central American countries are not predominantly wage-labor societies” and the aforementioned predominance of agriculture and land use, it is necessary to examine in detail the geography of El Salvador and Honduras and the land policies of each country.

There are three main bioregions in Central America. They consist of the Pacific Coastal Plain, the Central Highlands, and the Caribbean Zone. These zones provide ideal conditions for

34 Browning, 22.
35 Ehrlich, 311.
36 Weinberg, 153.
38 Weeks, 111.
growing cotton, coffee, and bananas, respectively. The Pacific Coastal Plain is a narrow strip of land that contains some of the most fertile soil on the planet. This plain, along with portions of the Central Highlands, are fertilized by deposits of volcanic ash from the volcanoes present in the central portion of Central America. Most Central American nations have their highest population densities along their Pacific coast.\textsuperscript{39} See Figure 2 for a map of volcano locations in Central America. El Salvador benefits greatly from these volcanoes, possessing large portions of Pacific Coastal Plain and fertile Central Highlands land. Thomas Anderson has quipped, “There seems to be a rule in El Salvador that every major city must have its own volcano.”\textsuperscript{40} El Salvador thus had perfect land conditions for either large-scale, commercial agriculture for export or the means to sustain a large population, but not both simultaneously.\textsuperscript{41}

**Figure 2. Volcanoes of Central America**

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{volcanoes_map.png}
\caption{Volcanoes of Central America}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{39} Weeks, 40.
\textsuperscript{41} Browning, 298-301.
Honduras has been constrained agriculturally. It lacks the volcanic ash-fertilized regions of El Salvador and is dominated by the Central Highlands and Caribbean Zone, with limited Pacific Coastal Plain. These zones are dominated by tropical rainforest. Although these zones see rainfall year-round, their soil is of poor quality. These rainforests are incapable of sustaining most forms of long-term agriculture. “In fact, they are really not appropriate for much of anything other than supporting rainforest…90 percent of the nutrients in the rainforest are in the vegetation itself.” The mountains of the Central Highlands also cover the majority of the land in Honduras, rendering it unsuitable for agriculture. 60.8 percent of the land in Honduras has a slope greater than 40 percent, making it unusable. See Figure 3 for an elevation map of Central America. Honduras has always had very low population densities in its interior, particularly along its border with El Salvador. As a result of its poorer soil quality, Honduras also has lower agricultural yields than El Salvador. It sees roughly half of El Salvador’s per-hectare yield of maize.

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43 Weinberg, 22.
44 Durham, 107-109.
Historically, Central America has maintained a dense, large population relative to the rest of the world. Prior to the arrival of Europeans in 1492, the region was the mostly densely populated region in the world. It has even been argued that before the time of Columbus’ first voyage, more people lived in the Americas than in Europe. These serve as major historical counterarguments to the overpopulation theory. It is clear that the way the land is used has changed, making current populations unsustainable. It was the arrival of the Spanish colonizers in Central America that drastically altered the agricultural techniques used in the region and devastated the local population, with an estimated 95 percent of the indigenous population eliminated over the first 130 years, largely due to disease.

The privately controlled, large-scale agriculture of the Spanish rapidly depleted the nutrients of the soil and severely damaged the local ecology in the lands they controlled. The Spanish system replaced the communal, sustainable subsistence system of the indigenous

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47 Mann, 92.
population and promoted the extreme concentration of land ownership still seen today.\textsuperscript{48} The oligarchic system of land control of the Spanish endured for centuries in Central America, even after independence in the early 1800s. “Spain laid the foundations for a Central American oligarchy through a land grants system, in which a small number of Spanish families were given control over the region’s main resource-land.”\textsuperscript{49} Despite numerous attempts at land reform since independence, no Central American nation had succeeded in redistributing land by the time of the Soccer War. It is helpful here to quote Latin American political analyst Tom Barry at length:

\begin{quote}
The main elements of Central America’s agroexport system—large landholdings, oligarchic control, and a repressed labor force—persist, despite the broadening of the economy and modernization of agricultural production. The changes in the economy and society have occurred without substantially altering old patterns of land and labor. In fact, the oligarchy’s hold on the region’s land, labor, and politics has tightened with the development of each new agroexport.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Since independence, the economies of Central America have depended almost entirely on agroexport—the export of cash crops—for economic growth and foreign currency. Through the development of agroexport, land concentration increased. Agroexport crops provide only seasonal labor and do not sustain peasants year-round. El Salvador formally abolished communal land rights in 1881, allowing for a full private takeover of the nation’s arable land.\textsuperscript{51} Coffee plantations soon dominated the fertile highlands, displacing subsistence farmers to other regions. From 1915 to 1928, coffee exports tripled from $7.37 million to $22.74 million. At the same time, food production began to decline. As agroexports rose and food production declined, El Salvador’s population was recovering from colonization.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[48]{Weinberg, 7-9.}
\footnotetext[49]{Barry, 44.}
\footnotetext[50]{Barry, 46.}
\footnotetext[51]{Anderson, 16-17.}
\end{footnotes}
By 1890, the population of El Salvador had risen to pre-Columbian levels. Tensions over land were on the rise between the landed elite and the increasingly displaced masses. When the global economy crashed in 1929, 350 upper-class Salvadoran families took the opportunity to organize and buy out large numbers of small landowners, further concentrating land ownership. A reformist government came to power in 1931 with the idea of redistributing land and easing the mounting social tensions in the agrarian nation. However, it was toppled in a coup backed by wealthy landowners in 1932. In response, the disenfranchised peasant population revolted. Roughly 1 percent of the population of El Salvador perished in what is now referred to as La Matanza, or “the Killing.” The subdual of this revolt suppressed the anger and frustration of the peasant population in the short-term. Agroexport continued to expand and displace more Salvadoran peasants. In particular, in the 1930s, a cotton boom began in El Salvador. Cotton gradually took over the fertile Pacific Coastal Plain, the breadbasket of Central America. Between 1935 and 1965, cotton acreage increased from 1,144 hectares to 110,792 hectares.

As coffee came to dominate to dominate the highlands and cotton the lowlands in El Salvador, poor Hondurans fared no better. The American-owned United Fruit Company began in the early 1900s to purchase thousands of hectares of Honduras’ arable land in the Caribbean Zone, its most fertile region. Through the violent intimidation and bribery of Honduran politicians, including the overthrow of the incumbent regime when the company first arrived in 1910, United Fruit became a powerful and successful company. In 1959, *Fortune* noted of United Fruit that, “in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, it is still the largest single private

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52 Anderson, 13-14.
54 Durham, 43-44.
55 Anderson, 29.
landowner, largest single business, and largest corporate employer.”\textsuperscript{57} United Fruit came to control vast amounts of land in plantations and railroads. It even provided basic services for its employees and their families that far surpassed those provided by the government.\textsuperscript{58}

United Fruit came to own over 300,000 acres by the early 1950s and, “in relation to the economy of Honduras, it was four times as important as was General Motors to the economy of the United States…Altogether, the banana industry, because of its influence in government land policy, its inducements for Salvadoran labor, and its economic control of the government, would play a large part in creating the conditions which led war in 1969.”\textsuperscript{59} Land concentration—primarily among the domestic landed elite in El Salvador and foreign fruit companies in Honduras—set the two nations on track for a major crisis of land.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to note an axiom of the \textit{campesinos}, or Central American peasant class: the \textit{campesinos} tend to relocate to uncultivated land when displaced. They find available land, whether it is claimed by the wealthy already or not, and cultivate it for their own subsistence. This was observed in both Honduran and Salvadoran peasant populations at the time of the Soccer War.\textsuperscript{60} This process was made all the more feasible by the low rates of cultivation by the wealthiest landowners, particularly in Honduras. In areas of low soil quality, it is necessary to allow land to lie fallow for two to three years. As such, farms with fifty or more hectares only had approximately 7 percent of their land under cultivation at a given time in Honduras.\textsuperscript{61} In El Salvador, farms larger than fifty hectares only cultivated 35 percent of their available land at a given time.\textsuperscript{62} In struggling for survival, peasants often have no qualms about

\textsuperscript{57} McCann, 61.  
\textsuperscript{58} Anderson, 47-49  
\textsuperscript{59} Anderson.  
\textsuperscript{60} Browning, 297-300.  
\textsuperscript{61} Durham, 127.  
\textsuperscript{62} Durham, 51.
infringing upon the uncultivated lands of the wealthy. The dichotomy of exploitive agroexport
cultivation by the few and small-scale subsistence farming by the many, as shown in Table 2, is
conveyed by David Browning, who explained, “Each year the acres of coffee, sugar, cotton, and
henequen are viewed by the hacendado as his personal possessions and the reward for his
ownership, organization and the use of the land. The campesino, whether he be cash tenant,
seasonally employed migrant, aparcero, colono, or squatter, regards the land about him as his
ally in the daily struggle of gaining his living.”

Table 2. Dichotomy of Competing Land Systems in Central America, 19th-20th Centuries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agroexport Agriculture</th>
<th>Subsistence Agriculture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primarily for Export</td>
<td>Primarily for Domestic, Local Consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large-scale, Land Intensive</td>
<td>Small-scale, Small Amounts of Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominated by Wealthy Elite, Significant Minority</td>
<td>Dominated by Poor Masses, Significant Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Use for Profit</td>
<td>Land Use for Survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Ownership</td>
<td>Communal Ownership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After World War II, the Central American agroexport sector grew at a rate never before seen. With the competition from Pacific nations removed following the war, Central America
had room for expansion. Across Central America, from 1950 to 1979, cotton production
increased ten-fold and coffee production doubled while land devoted to food production dropped
between 30 and 60 percent as it gave way to export crops. Weeks observed that “in few areas
of the world is such a large proportion of agricultural land devoted to products which the local
population does not consume or consumes only to a limited degree.” The expansion of
agroexport in the 1950s and 1960s “intensified grievances and conflicts in the countryside”

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63 Browning, 293.
64 Weeks, 26.
65 Barry, 40-43.
66 Weeks, 102.
across Central America, with El Salvador being a notable case in its failure to reform land policy in response.  

As a result of increases in agroexport, land concentration reached unprecedented levels in both El Salvador and Honduras following World War II. In Honduras, 8.8 percent of the population controlled 63.3 percent of the land by 1969. In El Salvador, by 1960, 0.01 percent of the population controlled 16 percent of the land.  

By 1961, 2 percent of the Salvadoran population owned 60 percent of the land. The proportion of the population listed as landless peasants in El Salvador increased from 11 to 40 percent between 1961 and 1975. This process of increasing agroexport production led to mass landlessness and subsequent pauperization of large segments of Salvadoran and Honduran society. It also led to an artificial food crisis as food-producing lands owned by peasants were displaced by land devoted to cash crops for export. Despite the fertility of El Salvador, by the time of war malnutrition affected 80 percent of children under five.  

This process of displacement by agroexport forced the peasant populations of both countries into the interior of Central America in search of land to produce food for survival. As the best arable land was taken for cash crops, peasants turned to the low-soil quality of the interior rainforests of Honduras. In El Salvador, due to the predominance of high-quality soil, peasants had nowhere to turn for new land. Wherever the soil could support cash crops, the landed elite had claimed it. The low soil quality of rainforests has made them “political safety valves” for many Central American nations, new “agricultural frontiers” undesired by exporters.

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68 Anderson, 17.
69 Anderson, 31-32.
70 Weinberg, 152.
71 Durham, 7.
to which displaced peasants could turn to sustain themselves. Thus many Salvadorans were forced to seek land in rainforest-covered Honduras, unable to find low-quality land in their own country.

El Salvador faced a land crisis before Honduras and the first waves of migrants were able to occupy Honduran land with no issue. As land became scarce in Honduras, Honduran peasants moved into less fertile regions in the highlands that previously had a low population density. The displaced masses of the two countries, upon encountering one another, stayed true to the aforementioned axiom of the Central American peasant. Both nationalities of peasants began squatting on the uncultivated land of wealthy Honduran landowners.

By 1969, Salvadoran migrants had come to comprise 20 percent of active agriculturalists in Honduras. United Fruit and wealthy Honduran landowners were clamoring for the eviction of Salvadoran migrants and the removal of all peasants from their lands. The Honduran government passed a law allowing for the eviction of migrants in 1963, which was not implemented until 1969. Before 1969, peasants reported bearing no ill will towards peasants of the other nationality, acknowledging the universal need to find land. Unlike in El Salvador throughout the 1960s, there was no more land to displace peasants to in Honduras, except back in land-scarce El Salvador. The situation escalated over the course of the 1960s and outpaced the traditional pace of reform in the two countries. The number of Salvadoran migrants in the region increased from an estimated 38,002 in 1961 to an estimated 300,000 by 1969. The stage

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72 Barry, 110-111.
73 Durham, 125.
74 Durham, 8.
75 Durham, 160.
was set for the Soccer War. See Figure 4 for the migration patterns of Salvadoran and Honduran peasants.

Figure 4. The Migration of Peasants in Honduras and El Salvador

Process tracing indicates that this is the narrative that policymakers in El Salvador discussed when deciding whether or not to initiate hostilities. In 1972, in examining the failure of international development programs in Central America since World War II, Gary Wynia found that government leaders, including the presidents of several countries including El Salvador and Honduras, explicitly stated their fear of wealthy landowners. These political leaders “very carefully acknowledged the policy claims of their societies’ most powerful groups, particularly those associated with export agriculture.” He also found that, since 1960, Salvadoran presidents’ responses to the grievances of the poor have “been limited by the… recurrent

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economic elite opposition to resource expanding reform measures.”79 To threaten these interest groups was to threaten the very survival of their governments. These confessions form the long-term basis of El Salvador’s intolerance toward the return of the migrants. The domestic land and political situation could not tolerate their return and critical political actors perceived a potential governmental collapse if they were to permit the migrants to return.

After the war, in a victory speech following the cessation of hostilities, Salvadoran President Fidel Sanchez Hernandez, “as if to acknowledge the role of land concentration in the conflict…called for public discussion of land reform and laid the groundwork for the First National Congress of Agrarian Reform.”80 It should also be noted that large landowners opposed this endeavor and, within three months, “the Legislative Assembly bowed to [this] pressure, and so stiffly amended the project as to annul it.”81

On the Honduran side, there were strong beliefs as to the motivations of El Salvador. A well-known politician and former cabinet member, on condition of anonymity, stated that “the war resulted from the lack of control of migration into Honduras which has brought about many problems for us and whose gestation dates to many years ago…[Expulsion] provoked anger among certain Salvadorean sectors who had taken it for granted that Honduras was the valve of escape for their excess population.”82 A lower-ranking government official at the time of war, also on condition of anonymity, asserted that “in El Salvador, all the land is in the hands of a few large latifundists but the territory has an area of 30,000 square kilometers (currently 21,000 sq. km.)…The real problem in El Salvador is land distribution. Here, on the other hand, we have

79 Wynia, 196.
80 Durham, 165-166.
81 Durham, 166-167.
82 Mundigo, 82.
immense unexploited wealth. Therefore they kept sending people to our country—the worst, not the best type.”

In answering the question of why migrants were moving from a more developed country to a less developed country, another Honduran politician, on condition of anonymity, claimed, “Their agrarian problems result from concentration of land in the hands of a few wealthy families while the majority of the peasants must face sub-human living conditions.” This assessment of the living conditions in El Salvador was not unique to Honduran politicians, as the Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States agreed. After investigating accusations of crimes against Salvadoran migrants in Honduras in 1969, one member of the Commission concluded that “the violation of human rights is that one country can’t support 300,000 of its people…that they have to leave, not to seek a life of luxury, no, but to try for a limited life in another poor country little better prepared to support them.”

Closer to the actual initiation of war, Salvadoran leaders discussed the possibility of war with Honduras in advance. In June 1968, amidst repeated border clashes, former Salvadoran President Osmin Aguirre y Salinas issued the following statement: “We should respond as strongly as did Israel to its ‘half-brother’ Arabs in June 1967. If you do this, Col. Sanchez Hernandez and 75% of the patriotic Salvadorenos will be with you to the end and beyond.” Sources close to the Salvadoran army also revealed that military planning had begun on June 1 in anticipation of hostilities in the coming months. It must be remembered that the eviction of Salvadoran migrants from Honduras began in early June 1969. The beginning of military

83 Durham, 89.
84 Durham, 86.
86 Anderson, 111.
87 Anderson, 110.
planning in El Salvador directly coincided with the onset of evictions. This is evidence against the nationalism theory, as the first qualifying match, and the beginning of the tension between the Salvadoran and Honduran publics, was June 8, a full week later.\textsuperscript{88} It is clear that the surprise attack was premeditated in response to the large-scale evictions and not a knee-jerk reaction to nationalistic outrage. Nationalism hastened the process of military escalation; it did not begin it.

In an interview with former President Hernandez, Anderson reports that the president believed “the situation with the refugees had become intolerable and that El Salvador therefore made a quick decision to attack to put pressure on Honduras to reform its anti-Salvadoran policy.”\textsuperscript{89} He also noted “the great pressure he was under from public opinion and his own military, declaring that if [he] had not invaded on the fourteenth, there would have been a coup in twenty-four hours.”\textsuperscript{90} While this may at first appear to be an unverifiable excuse, it must be noted that coups were common in Central America at the time, with El Salvador’s most recent coup having occurred nine years prior. See Table 3 for a tabulation of successful coups in Central America by country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Successful Coups Since Independence by Country in Central America Up to 1969* \textsuperscript{91, 92}</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
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*Belize did not gain independence until 1981.

This explicit mention of public pressure does lend credence to the nationalism theory and requires an examination of the domestic atmosphere in El Salvador in the weeks leading up to war. While long-term evidence is lacking for this theory, short-term evidence is present.

\textsuperscript{88} Anderson, 110.
\textsuperscript{89} Anderson, 111.
\textsuperscript{90} Anderson, 111.
Nationalist sentiment was pervasive following the first two of three qualifying matches for the 1970 World Cup between El Salvador and Honduras. The first match was played in Honduras on Sunday, June 8. The Salvadoran team was “the target of psychological warfare waged by the Honduran fans” the night before the game, which ensured they slept little.93 Honduras won the match the following day, 1-0.

Amelia Bolanios, an 18-year-old Salvadoran girl, reacted to the loss immediately by committing suicide. The following day a major Salvadoran newspaper reported: “The young girl could not bear to see her fatherland brought to its knees.”94 The rest of the country could not accept the outcome either, as “the whole capital took part in the televised funeral of Amelia Bolanios. An army honour guard marched with a flag at the head of the procession. The president of the republic and his ministers walked behind the flag-draped coffin.”95 The participation by the highest levels of the Salvadoran government in this public, soccer-related funeral indicate the intense emotions of the public at the time.

The second qualifying match was played in the capital of El Salvador, San Salvador. Enraged Salvadorans kept the Honduran national team awake the entire night before the second match on June 15. El Salvador won handily 3-0 the next day. The Honduran team required an army escort and transportation by armored car to and from the stadium. During pregame ceremonies, the Honduran flag was burned and the Salvadorans instead “ran a dirty, tattered dishrag up the flag pole”.96 In the aftermath of this event, two Honduran fans were killed and 150 cars owned by Honduran fans were burned. Proponents of the nationalism theory also point out

94 Kapuściński, 158.
95 Kapuściński, 158.
96 Kapuściński, 158-159.
that the border between the two countries was closed hours after the game. Media in both countries began making accusations and counteraccusations of outrageous crimes, such as a “woman stripped and violated in the street by Salvadoran mobs,” genocide, and various forms of psychological degradation involving human feces and urine. “Newspapers on both sides waged a campaign of hate, slander, and abuse, calling each other Nazis, dwarfs, drunkards, sadists, spiders, aggressors, and thieves.”

The OAS Human Rights Subcommittee reported that, “in the events which occurred in El Salvador and Honduras, the press and radio bear an enormous responsibility.” On July 17, the Washington Post claimed that “the Salvadoreans living in Honduras are hostages to Honduran popular fury” and again on July 18 reported from El Salvador that “a principal factor in the elevated passion both here and in Honduras has been incessant inflammatory broadcasts by both countries. The radio and most of the press have attacked without qualification each other’s president, populace, and customs.” This issue became so important that the final peace treaty between the two countries even contained a specific article for mutual respect of people and culture and for ensuring responsible media in both countries.

In the time of nationalist frenzy before the start of the war, the eviction of Salvadoran migrants became violent. Many Honduran civilians joined in the evictions as part of impromptu militias. Shops were burned and killings in rural areas occurred sporadically. Salvadoran

97 Kapuściński, 158-159.
98 Anderson, 94.
99 Kapuściński, 183.
100 Anderson, 101.
newspapers made accusations of atrocities daily, while the Salvadoran government filed an official complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. When El Salvador formally severed diplomatic relations with Honduras on June 26, the official justification given stated: “the government of Honduras has not taken any effective measures to punish these crimes which constitute genocide, nor has it given assurances of indemnification or reparations for the damages caused to Salvadoreans.” Honduras claimed the migrants were in the country illegally and that it was evicting the migrants under its own domestic laws regarding land rights. The exact legality of evictions and the validity of accusations were lost in the media craze and subsequent outbreak of hostilities.

**Assessing the Evidence and the Primary Cause of the Soccer War**

It is evident that many of the predictions I detailed for each of the three theories were correct. The nationalism theory correctly explains the occurrence of crimes based upon nationality, the assignment of collective blame by the public and both governments, the occurrence of extensive, slanderous, and often false media coverage of these events, an unwillingness for repentance, and a lack of dissenting opinions in public discussion, with much of it focused on the migrants. This theory also predicts with a small degree of success discussions by leaders on both sides of crimes against national honor, including genocide accusations, and the legal status of the migrants. It incorrectly predicted national honor and prestige as the primary motivation for the use of force.

The overpopulation theory correctly predicted high population growth, high population density, insufficient domestic food production, and high landlessness. It failed to account for the

105 Bachmura.
106 Anderson, 105.
107 Mundigo, 87.
ability of El Salvador to support its growing population with its given resources and incorrectly predicted a natural, as opposed to artificial, food shortage and overcrowding as the motivation for the migrants leaving El Salvador. Process tracing also does not support this theory. While it enhanced the problems posed by the land policies of both countries, it was not a primary factor in the decision-making process of El Salvador’s leaders.

The land monopolization theory correctly predicted massive inequality in land ownership, mass landlessness, the domination of non-subsistence agriculture, and an artificial decline in food production. It incorrectly predicted social unrest related to landlessness and land inequality, though, in the long term, the subjugation of the peasant class during La Matanza cannot be ignored. A prediction of social unrest also appears to have been incorrect in and of itself, for social unrest was avoided through the displacement of the poor to Honduras. The migrants that did return to El Salvador, however, “erected shanty towns in San Salvador and on the edges of plantations, creating new pockets of social unrest.”108 Fears of the return of the migrants were well-founded. The economic and agricultural data regarding El Salvador also points to the inability of El Salvador to accommodate the return of 300,000 migrants with the land policies it had at the time. Land policy drove the migrants from El Salvador and land policy prevented their return. There was no land available for them and hence no means of feeding them. The vast majority of crops being produced were for export and not domestic consumption.

Most importantly, process tracing strongly supports this theory. This theory correctly predicted Salvadoran leaders’ fear of the landed elite and the policy-making constraints this placed upon them. It also highlights their fears of the potential for social unrest if the migrants returned. Statements in the post-war victory speech by President Hernandez identify land as a major issue related to the war. Honduran politicians also repeatedly referenced the problem of

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108 Barry, 111.
land as it related to the issue of migrants and social unrest in El Salvador. Military planning also began a week before the first soccer match, when evictions were ongoing but before nationalist sentiment became virulent.

I conclude that land monopolization was the primary cause of the Soccer War, with overpopulation and nationalism serving as secondary causes. Land monopolization made the return of the migrants to El Salvador intolerable and their return a threat to the economic and political elite of the country. El Salvador was limited in the policy options it had available and thus resorted to war.

**GENERALIZABLE IMPLICATIONS: DISTANT AND PROXIMATE CAUSES AND FIRST-MOVE ADVANTAGES**

The Soccer War provides a number of lessons that can be applied to interstate wars more generally. It provides a clear demonstration of the benefits of utilizing a framework of distant and proximate causes of war. Levy and Thompson elaborate on this framework, stating that “in the aggregate, broad system-, economic-, or societal-level forces probably have a greater impact than particular individuals on the formation of rivalries and/or on the underlying processes leading to war, while the impact of individuals…usually increases as a dispute or crisis moves closer to final decisions for war.”¹⁰⁹ All wars have multiple causes of varying importance. Some of these causes are distant and play out over the long term. Others are proximate, affecting the likelihood of war in the short term.

The economic and agricultural structures of colonization proved resilient over the course of Central American history. When the borders of Central America were drawn at the time of independence, El Salvador and Honduras inherited resource endowments and economic and

agricultural systems that set them on course for future tensions. Land policy steadily produced the circumstances that led to war, despite numerous opportunities to reform and events such as La Matanza. Land policy therefore provided macro-level, long-term causes. Other causes are more proximate and temporally close to the outbreak of war, such as the media war and consequent nationalist sentiment preceding the Soccer War in mid-June and early July 1969. Individual politicians, landowners, and media personalities had a more significant impact in this time period. Proximate and distant causes of war interact with one another to lead a state to go to war. Van Evera provides a general framework in which the primary cause of land monopolization and the secondary causes of nationalism and overpopulation interacted to increase the likelihood of war.

The Soccer War illustrates a clear case of Van Evera’s hypothesis that war is more likely when the advantage lies with the first side to mobilize or attack. In addition to a first-move advantage, other factors that may increase the risk of war identified by Van Evera applicable to the Soccer War include a preemptive first strike and truncated diplomacy. Van Evera argues that a first-move advantage is obtained when an attacker improves their prospect of victory through mobilizing and striking first. They may inflict greater damage on the other side than if they waited for the other side to attack them.

He also argues that a preemptive strike is likely when it is perceived to be likely that an opponent will strike first and obtain a first-strike advantage. It is necessary to strike the opponent before they move first in order to gain a first-strike advantage. Truncated diplomacy occurs when the benefits of obtaining a first-strike advantage demand immediate action. Diplomacy may reduce the potential benefits of a first-strike advantage by consuming precious time. Thus

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diplomatic efforts are not fully pursued in order to obtain the maximum benefit of a first-strike advantage. As I have argued in this paper, land monopolization created the conditions that forced 300,000 Salvadorans into Honduras and made their return an imminent threat to El Salvador, necessitating (in the eyes of Salvadoran politicians at least) the use of force. In the framework of Van Evera’s first-move hypothesis, once faced with this imminent threat, El Salvador mobilized and struck first in order to obtain first-move advantages. War could not be avoided diplomatically because diplomacy was truncated.

El Salvador enjoyed a known advantage in ground forces, with approximately a 4-to-1 advantage in infantry. El Salvador could marshal an estimated 9,000 ground troops to Honduras’ 2,500, widely known to be of lower quality than Salvadoran forces. El Salvador also possessed superiority in artillery and small arms. However, El Salvador was significantly weaker than Honduras in airpower. El Salvador possessed only eleven World War II-era combat aircraft. Honduras fielded twenty-three next-generation combat aircraft and was known to have superior pilots. Honduras also possessed multiple airports capable of supporting military aircraft, while El Salvador had only one. Both nations also positioned substantial numbers of troops on their shared border despite calls by the Central American Mediation Commission to demobilize on July 12, presenting a situation in which there was a reciprocal fear of a surprise attack.

Van Evera’s hypothesis correctly predicts the behavior of El Salvador on the three points presented here. First, Salvadoran leaders at the highest levels of government viewed the return of refugees as an imminent threat and sought a preemptive strike in order to prevent domestic insurrection or a coup. While the possibility of the fear of a Honduran surprise attack was possible, it was unlikely given the inferiority of the Honduran ground forces. That Honduras was

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111 Anderson, 116.  
112 Anderson, 114.
aware of the threat posed to El Salvador by the return of the migrants was a more realistic possibility. Weiner has argued that forced population displacement can be an effective means of destabilizing a rival.\textsuperscript{113} Regardless of intentions, the return of the migrants was perceived as an imminent threat.

Second, El Salvador sealed its border and severed diplomatic ties at the height of the crisis amidst a nationalistic frenzy, unable to attempt diplomacy for domestic reasons and greatly increasing the likelihood of war. Various Central American regional institutions, as well as the foreign ministers of several Central American nations, attempted to facilitate diplomacy between El Salvador and Honduras. The Honduran ambassador had also informed the Salvadoran government that the Honduran government was open to suggestions and that it did not wish to see violence.\textsuperscript{114} However, truncated diplomacy closed the door on a possible diplomatic resolution. It is also possible, given that military planning began on June 1, that El Salvador would not have negotiated under any circumstances.

Third, El Salvador mobilized before Honduras on July 2, in anticipation of conflict and in the hope of striking first.\textsuperscript{115} After six weeks of anticipating war in light of an imminent threat, El Salvador had multiple advantages to gain from mobilizing and striking first. El Salvador struck first in an attempt to nullify the air superiority of Honduras, striking at its airfields in the opening move of the assault. Surprise was achieved and the Salvadoran air assault proceeded to bomb multiple targets, including the Honduran capital, unopposed. In reference to this initial surprise air assault, Anderson finds that “the Salvadorans decided to overcome the enemy’s advantage in equipment and training by launching a preemptive strike.”\textsuperscript{116} Its fears of the Honduran air force

\textsuperscript{113} Weiner.  
\textsuperscript{114} Anderson, 108.  
\textsuperscript{115} Anderson, 108.  
\textsuperscript{116} Anderson, 114.
later proved to be correct, as Honduras counterattacked with its superior air force. The Honduran air force inflicted significant casualties on the Salvadoran air force and destroyed the main fuel storage sites of the Salvadoran ground forces. With El Salvador failing to eliminate the Honduran air force, the superior Honduran air force was able to severely inhibit the movement of El Salvador’s superior ground forces. The motives to move first were validated by the events of the war. Had El Salvador neutralized the Honduran air force, it likely would have won the war.\textsuperscript{117} See Table 4 for a summary of the application of Van Evera’s hypothesis to the Soccer War.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preemptive Strike</th>
<th>First-Move Advantage</th>
<th>Truncated Diplomacy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Possible Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack Due to Honduran Mobilization</td>
<td>Mobilized First</td>
<td>Sealed Border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imminent Threat of Migrant Return</td>
<td>Struck First in Undeclared Surprise Attack to Neutralize Honduran Air Force</td>
<td>Severed Diplomatic Ties</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**CONCLUSION**

The primary cause of the Soccer War was land monopolization. The wealthy elite of both El Salvador and Honduras constrained the actions of political leaders in the two countries and stymied every attempt at land reform, resorting to coups on multiple occasions. The civil war in El Salvador that began in 1980 was an extension of the unresolved land problems of the Soccer War.\textsuperscript{118} The priorities of the wealthy have led to the continued denial of a means of survival to the majority of the population as well as multiple conflicts. A similar dynamic of inattentive and ignorant leaders fostered the collapse of the Maya in Central America, a far larger and, relative to

\textsuperscript{117} Anderson, 115.
\textsuperscript{118} Weinberg, 58.
time period, advanced civilization than El Salvador at the time of the Soccer War.\footnote{Diamond, Jared M. \textit{Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed}. New York: Viking, 2005. 177. Print.} The needs of the majority of a given population cannot be ignored indefinitely. If elites do not address them, the masses will likely attempt to address them themselves at some point in the future.

Generalizable findings can also be derived from this case regarding inter-state war. This war provides evidence for Stephen Van Evera’s first-move advantage hypothesis and the corollaries of preemptive strikes and truncated diplomacy. The issues regarding migrants and land policy in both countries could have been solved peacefully and war could have been avoided, but El Salvador nonetheless resorted to war. Given the credence this case lends to Van Evera’s hypothesis, it may be possible to use this framework to identify similar situations in which the outbreak of war is likely and how it can be prevented.

By determining what a given state may identify as an imminent threat and avoiding the truncation of diplomacy, the dynamics of a first-move advantage may not always apply. Effective interstate communication regarding each state’s national interests and what is acceptable and unacceptable for their security could significantly reduce the likelihood of war. In studying the causes of war, the causes of peace are also identified. It is these lessons that are valuable, for while the Soccer War may appear to be a structural inevitability, numerous opportunities for its prevention were missed.