Original Manuscript

Journal of Conflict Resolution
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–26

DOI: 10.1177/00220027231185575
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcr
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Rebel, Remain, or Resign? Military Elites' Decision-Making at the Onset of the American Civil War

Peter B. White[1]

Abstract

A critical element in civil wars is military fragmentation. Yet, we have a limited understanding of why military elites fight in civil wars and on what side. In this article I develop a theory of the economic and professional motivations of military elites. I test this theory using the case of West Point graduates in the American Civil War. I argue that in addition to home state, economic and professional interests were a major influence on West Pointers. Graduates with connections to Southern cash crops were less likely to fight for the Union and more likely to fight for the Confederacy. Higher ranking graduates were more likely to fight for both sides, as they were better positioned to compete for promotion. I test this argument using a new dataset of more than 1000 West Point graduates' wartime allegiances and antebellum careers and find strong evidence in support of my expectations.

Keywords

civil wars, civil-military relations, fragmentation, internal armed conflict

Introduction

The military is a vital actor in civil wars. Governments need militaries to fight rebels. And rebels can enjoy a substantial boost to their capabilities if they can attract members

[1]Auburn University, Auburn, AL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Peter B. White, Auburn University, 7080 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849, USA.
Email: pbw0011@auburn.edu

of the military. As leaders of the military, officers must make decisions on whether to fight and for which side. These decisions have vital implications for the severity of civil war. Civil wars in which the military fragments are substantially bloodier than conflicts in which it remains unified (McLauchlin 2022). Military officers are experts in armed violence. They represent a vital pool of human capital for both sides. The decisions of officers also may influence their subordinates' decisions. When civil war begins how do military officers decide whether to desert—flee the conflict—defect—join the rebels—or remain loyal to the government?

This is question for which both scholars and policymakers lack an answer. While there is a well-developed literature on rebel movement fragmentation and decision-making (Cunningham 2006; Cunningham 2013; Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012), there is a significant gap in scholarly understanding of military fragmentation and the decision-making of individual officers at the start of civil war. This is a notable gap given the high level of violence that civil wars with military fragmentation see (McLauchlin 2022). This lack of understanding has real-world consequences. Policymakers were caught off guard when an estimated 50% of Ukrainian military officers in Crimea defected to separatist forces in 2014.[1] Expectations regarding the likely actions of Syrian military officers at the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011–12 were also based on overly-simplistic understandings of ethnic cleavages in Syria, and neglected professional and economic incentives (Khaddour n.d.).

In this article, I argue that economic and professional motivations are a major driver of military officers' decisions. While factors such as ideology and regional and ethnic cleavages matter a great deal, military elites will be motivated also by the economic stakes of the civil war as well as professional considerations. Put differently, self-interest is a major driver of military elites' decision-making when civil war begins. Opportunities for professional advancement in wartime military expansion will make officers more likely to participate in the war. Further, officers will also be influenced by the economic stakes of the war. I test these expectations using the case of West Point graduates in the American Civil War.

The American Civil War is a vital case for scholars of civil war more broadly. As Arnold, Chatagnier, and Hollibaugh (2020) argue, the conflict is generalizable to a broader set of modern conflicts, given the introduction of many modern technologies and tactics during the conflict. The American Civil War is also notable for the central role that military leadership played in battlefield outcomes (McPherson 2003), making it an important case for testing theories related to the decision-making of those that would become military leaders during the conflict. The American Civil war also presents a "crucial case" for testing theories regarding economic and professional motivations to fight. Ideological motivations, such as Abolitionism, White Supremacy, and regional affinity were major motivators for combatants (McPherson 1997). Strong evidence that economic and professional incentives drove the decision-making of a substantial portion of the military elite at the onset of such an ideologically-driven conflict should suggest that the findings here are generalizable to a broader set of cases (Ruffa 2020).

Specifically, I expect that West Pointers who have achieved a higher rank will be more likely to fight in the American Civil War, because they will be better positioned to take advantage of the opportunities for rapid advancement, given the way in which both Union and Confederate armies expanded in 1861. I also anticipate that because of the centrality of slavery to the war, West Pointers with a stake in Southern cash crops will be less likely to side with the Union and more likely to join the rebels. I expect that this effect should be evident even when controlling for regional origin.

I test these expectations quantitatively using a new dataset of all West Point graduates from the classes of 1802–1861 who were alive when the war began. I find strong support for the expectation that West Pointers who had achieved a higher antebellum rank were more likely to fight in the war—with the strongest effect evident for graduates siding with the Union. I find also that involvement in Southern cash crops made graduates substantially less likely to side with the Union and made Northern and Border State graduates more likely to side with the Confederacy.

This article makes several important contributions. First, this article enhances our understanding of how military elites decide whether to fight and on which side in a civil war. With few exceptions (Arnold, Chatagnier, and Hollibaugh 2020; Reiter and Wagstaff 2018), there is a striking absence of studies that put forward and test theories about the behavior of individual military commanders. This gap is notable given the importance of military elites to the conduct of civil war. Second, by examining military disintegration at the outset of civil war, this article offers a new way to consider combatant fragmentation in civil war and provides and an important addition to the growing literature on rebel fragmentation in civil war (Pearlman and Cunningham 2012). Third, it deepens our understanding of the behavior of a key group in the American Civil War. It highlights the substantial number of military elites who either sat out the war or fought for a side other than their regional origin would suggest and examines the causes of these unexpected decisions. This contributes to our broader understanding of the American Civil War, adding a new layer to scholarship that argues economic and professional considerations could override ideology and regional loyalties for military elites.

This article begins with a discussion of the literature on individual choices in civil war and military decision-making in intra-state conflict. In the next section I discuss general theoretical expectations as well as more specific hypotheses related to the behavior of West Pointers. In the third section, I introduce the new dataset on antebellum West Point graduates. The fourth section contains the statistical analyses and test the hypotheses generated by the theory. In the fifth, I offer a conclusion, summarizing the findings and implications for future research.

Individual Choices During Civil War

There is a growing literature on the choices that individuals make during civil wars regarding whether to fight and on what side. There are diverse factors that motivate combatants (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008). Fear of victimization plays a major role

in the decision to fight (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). Past abuse by the government can at once make someone more likely to side with rebels and less likely to fight for the government (Henn and Huff 2021). In addition, ideology (Wood 2003), preexisting social structures and networks (Parkinson 2013; Shesterinina 2016),[2] ethnic cleavages (Horowitz 2000; McLauchlin 2010), and local conflicts (Kalyvas 2003) all can play a part.

One of the primary drivers of conflict participation is economic incentives and livelihoods. There is an extensive debate regarding whether the economic drivers of civil war can be characterized by "grievance" or "greed" (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Grievances, such as inequality (Cederman, Weidmann, and Bormann 2015; Gurr 2015; Kuhn and Weidmann 2015), can be an important factor in motivating individual decisions. The hope of economic benefit is also a major driver. And there is also evidence that individuals seeking short-term gains will join rebellions in resource-rich areas, hoping for loot—while more committed rebels are likely to join resource-poor rebels (Lujala 2010; Weinstein 2005).

The existing literature tends to focus on combatants generally with less specific attention paid to the decisions of a critical group: current and former military officers. This is a notable gap. Military officers command and lead troops and are specialists in "the management of violence"—the training and equipping of forces for, the planning of, and the execution of "successful armed combat" (Huntington 1981, 11). Competent military officers are vital part of effectively implementing modern tactics (Biddle 2010). They represent an important pool of human capital in civil wars. Beyond their skills, the decisions of military officers may influence those of many of their subordinates. La Parra-Pérez (2020) finds that at the outset of the Spanish Civil War military officers were more likely to join Franco's rebellion if their commanders joined. In addition, current military officers also may have access to weapons and other military material that civilians do not.

The decisions of *former* military officers are also vital to understand. Former officers may recruit former subordinates. Themnér (2013) finds that former mid-level officers are key actors in the remobilization of combatant networks in peacetime. A recent example can be found in Khalifa Haftar's creation of the Libyan National Army in 2014 during the Libyan Civil War through former subordinates and comrades from his time as a colonel in the regular Libyan army.[3]

There has been extensive research showing that rebel fragmentation contributes to civil war onset (Cunningham 2013) and longer, more recurrent, and more violent civil wars (Cunningham 2011; Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012; Rudloff and Findley 2016). Much less understood is fragmentation of the state's military. The historical records suggest that military fragmentation can be a crucial ingredient for a bloody civil war. Some of the most violent civil wars—e.g., the United States' (1861–65), Spain's (1936–39), Russia's (1917–23), South Yemen's (1986), the break-up of Yugoslavia (1991–95), Syria's (2011-present)—have begun with the fragmentation of the state's regular military. McLauchlin (2022) finds that from 1946–2013, 13% of intra-state conflicts have been "army-splinter rebellions"—conflicts that begin when

a part of the state's military breaks away and forms a rebel group (or comprises a large portion of it), and these conflicts tend to be bloodier and more complex.

The Motivations of Military Officers

Understanding the decisions of *individual* officers is vital. The process of military fragmentation is made of the decisions of individual officers to either remain loyal, rebel, or resign. What motivates officers' decisions? Military leaders do not want their institution to be caught on the losing side of intra-state conflict (Bell and Sudduth 2017), and want to avoid intra-military violence (Singh 2014). Where the sources of the conflict are reflected in the military, the military may fragment in the same way that the broader society does. For example, while the Syrian military is often described as having sided with the Assad regime against protesters, it has not been a unified in its reaction to the uprising—with substantial desertions among the officer corps (Albrecht and Ohl 2016).

Broader societal conflicts are reflected in the military and may provide motivation to officers. Bou Nassif (2015) finds that among Sunni officers who defected early in the Syrian civil war, grievances regarding the preferential treatment of non-Sunni officers were common. Harkness (2018) demonstrates that in ethnically polarized states, coups by militaries organized along ethnic lines are often provoked by attempts to alter the ethnic balance of power in the state. Similarly, Dwyer finds that in Burkina Faso in 2011, military mutinies paralleled civilian protests against the incumbent regime (Dwyer 2017). Lyall (2020) also finds that inequality among ethnic groups in an army leads to higher instances of both desertion and defection. Yet, preferential treatment also can make officers of the ethnic "in-group" more likely to stay loyal to the government (McLauchlin 2010).

Beyond broader societal conflicts, unit-level factors matter a great deal. Hundman and Parkinson (2019) find that individual *disobedience* by military officers depends on the social network of officers. Relatedly, McLauchlin (2015) finds that the decision for soldiers in a civil war to desert is explained largely by unit-level factors, such as the degree to which a unit is made up of conscripts or volunteers, and the social backgrounds of soldiers.

Moving from both societal and unit-level factors, individual characteristics also drive decision-making in wartime. Manekin (2017) demonstrates that despite socialization pressures and the hierarchical nature of the military, the individual agency and perception of military missions by soldiers can produce resistance within the ranks. Costa and Kahn (2003) find that age, ideology, marital status, and occupation are also important predictors of whether individuals desert their units. Expectations of favorable treatment and short captivity also make soldiers more likely to surrender (Grauer 2014) In line with the literature on "greed" in civil war, a further factor to consider is economic and professional self-interest. In an important study, La Parra-Perez (2020) does examine the decisions to take sides of individual officers at the outset of the Spanish Civil War (1936–9). He finds that those whose career prospects had been harmed by military

reforms or were promoted more slowly were more likely to join the rebellion. La Parra-Perez's study points to the possibility that while the societal conflicts and unit-level factors matter, an understudied aspect of military elites' decision-making is their professional and economic self-interests.

Because war draws especially on the skills of military officers, officers may see opportunity for rapid improvement of their professional position. This is compounded by the rapid expansion of both rebel and state military forces that is likely at the onset of civil war. Opportunities likely abound for military elites at the onset of civil war in a way that they do not in peacetime. The potential for advancement should influence officers' decision to fight.

Beyond the professional considerations, the economic stakes of the civil war are also important motivators to individual military officers. Opportunities for personal enrichment may be a motivator for current and former officers to fight. Ohl, Albrecht, and Koehler (2015) find that despite the sectarian dimension to the conflict, opportunities for corruption have played a major role in officers' decisions to either remain loyal to the regime, desert, or defect to the rebels in the Syrian civil war. Financial benefits such as housing allowances have also influenced the decisions of Sunni officers in the Syrian army to remain loyal to the government, despite their sectarian identification potentially predisposing them to side with the rebels (Khaddour n.d.). Weinstein (2005) and Lujala (2010) find that while ideologically committed individuals may join rebel movements absent financial inducements, less motivated rebels will join rebel movements when they anticipate enrichment. This suggests that among military elites, while professional ethos and ideological commitment may motivate some officers, there is likely a large group whose decisions to fight and on which side are driven by anticipated economic opportunities.

Even in a highly polarized ideological or ethnic conflict, professional incentives and economic motives as a major factor among military elites. To examine more closely the question of motivation to fight among military elites I use the case of the US Army at the onset of the American Civil War. The US Army fragmented in 1861, with its officer corps divided between those that remained with the army, those that defected to the secessionists, and those that resigned but did not fight. This represents a useful case to test the theory in part because ideology was such a major motivator for combatants. Loyalty to one's home state, White Supremacy, Abolitionism, and a dedication to preserving the Union were all major ideological currents in the conflict (McPherson 1997). The deep ideological and sectional motivations in the American civil war make it a "crucial case" for testing a theory about professional and economic motivations to fight (Ruffa 2020). Strong evidence that military elites in the American Civil War were also motivated by career and economic incentives may suggest that such patterns are present for military elites in other conflicts as well.

In picking the American Civil War as a case, it is critical first to establish that significant variation in whether an Antebellum US Army officer fought and for which side can be explained by factors other than regional affiliation. While certainly a Southerner was, all things being equal, more likely to have fought for the Confederacy

than the Union—vice versa being true for a Northerner—thousands of individuals fought "for the other side". Indeed, more than 100,000 Black and White Southern Unionists served in the United States Army fighting against the Confederacy during the American Civil War and as part of the United States Colored Troops (Current 1992).

While incidence of Northern residents fighting for the Confederacy was rare (though not unheard of)[4]—recent Northern transplants to the southern states fought for the Confederacy in surprisingly large numbers (Zimring 2014). For example, Archibald Gracie III—from a prominent New York family and a West Point graduate—moved to Mobile, Alabama in 1857, joined the Confederate cause in 1861, ultimately rising to the rank of Brigadier General (Patterson 2002). Bushrod Jonson—also a West Point graduate from an abolitionist family in Ohio—moved to Tennessee in 1849, joining the Confederate cause in 1861, rising to Major General by war's end (Patterson 2002). Indeed, the highest-ranking Confederate General during the war, Samuel Cooper, was a native New Yorker. In Border States—e.g., Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri—regional loyalties were even murkier. Significant portions of the populations of these states fought for either side in the conflict.

Another puzzle is abstainers. A substantial minority also sat out the war—even absent infirmity or old age. There was significant variation across states and counties of the Confederacy in enlistment in the Confederate army, as well as the efficacy of societal pressure to fight for secession (Hall, Huff, and Kuriwaki 2019). As Table 1 in the following section demonstrates, more than 16% of West Pointers alive at its start did not fight in the war. The future commander of all Union forces, Ulysses Grant came very close to sitting out the war entirely when his attempts to secure high rank in the Illinois volunteer regiments were initially unsuccessful (Chernow 2017, Ch. 7).

The story of the American Civil War is much more complex than "Southerners fought for the Confederacy and Northerners for the Union." There were abstainers on both sides, Southerners who fought for the Union, recent Northern transplants to the South who fought for the Confederacy, and border states in which significant portions of the population sided with either of the two. The key question, then, is—beyond native region—what drove the decision to fight, and to pick the Union side over the Confederate one or vice-versa?

In this article, I focus on graduates of the United States Military Academy—"West Point." This subpopulation is critical to test the general argument about the decisions of former and current military officers. In the antebellum United States Army—military expertise was primarily concentrated in West Pointers—by 1860 more than three-quarters of the officer corps of the army was made up of West Point graduates (Skelton 1992). And while the officer corps greatly expanded during the war to include many non-West Pointers, graduates of the academy were disproportionately represented in the top ranks. Nearly all of the war's major battles of the war saw at least one side commanded by a West Pointer (Newell 2014).

The United States is not an outlier in having a well-developed academy system from which leaders of both sides in the conflict were drawn. Böhmelt, Escribà-Folch, and Pilster (2019) find that from 1950–2004, 97% of countries maintained or established at

Table 1. Side in American Civil War and Regional Origin.

	Northern	Southern	Border
Did not fight	126 (16%)	41 (16%)	20 (18%)
Union	574 (74%)	43 (17%)	54 (47%)
Confederacy	74 (10%)	173 (67%)	40 (35%)

least one military academy—with 45% having at least one academy for the entire period. Indeed, an examination of their data demonstrates than in 65% of country-years where a country was experiencing a civil war from 1950–2004, the country had at least one military academy. The intersection of civil wars and a military academy system is more common than not in the modern period. Accordingly, the decision-making process of academy graduates in deciding to fight in civil war—and what side to take—is not a rare phenomenon.

Beyond regional affiliation, what drove West Pointers decisions regarding whether to fight and on which side? In line with the general theoretical framework, I expect that West Pointers in 1861 would be motivated by their military careers as well as by the economic stakes of the American Civil War.

First, I expect that graduates who had achieved a higher rank would be more likely to fight than sit out the war. In the period in between Lincoln's inauguration and the firing on Fort Sumter, both the Union and Confederate militaries underwent massive expansion—the Confederate military being built from scratch (Patterson 2002), and the Union Army being expanded from the small nucleus of around 15,000 soldiers and officers. The initial expansion of the US Army began in April 1861 with Lincoln calling for 75,000 volunteers. Current and former regular Army officers could expect rapid advancement to fill new vacancies.

While the opportunities for advancement for military professionals were clear, the decentralization of the commissioning system led to uncertainty regarding advancement. The appointment of officers was left to the state government for all positions Colonel and below. Leaving the appointment of lower ranks to the states created opportunities for patronage and social and political networks to figure into appointments rather than expertise (Chernow 2017, Ch. 7). In practice, in the rapidly expanding "volunteer" regiments raised in 1861, junior officers—captains and lieutenants—were elected by the soldiers, and field grade officers—majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels—were appointed by the state's governor. Political patronage and social networks at the state level were a major factor in these appointments. Regular army officers, who had tended to spend significant time on the frontier and states other than their home state had not developed as significant in-state networks and were at a disadvantage when competing for these ranks. However, the President appointed generals. President Lincoln strongly preferred to elevate regular officers (Hicks 1918).[5] This would give West Point graduates—who represented the vast majority of regular officers—a stronger chance of competing for general officer rank, but likely only if their

prior rank made a jump to generalship plausible. It would be difficult for a relatively "green" lieutenant to make the jump to general officer, over majors and colonels.

Regular army officers who could plausibly compete for general officer ranks were not subject to state-level political considerations, as these appointments were made at the federal level. Officers who had achieved a higher rank would be more likely to fight and to serve on the Union side, as they could expect to be competitive for general officer ranks for which the appointment processes were more centralized and privileged professional experience. More junior officers for whom a general's position was not plausible would have to compete in the chaotic state-level appointment process for field-grade ranks. Grant, for example, almost sat out the civil war altogether when his efforts to secure a Colonel's commission in Illinois were stymied by lack of political connections (Chernow 2017, Ch. 7).

A similar situation prevailed in the Confederate army. Here, each state had different policies regarding the appointment of former U.S. Army officers—and as with the Union states, political connections were key (Patterson 2002, 9). Appointment to general officer positions followed a similar process as in the Union—with these appointments reserved for the president (Eicher and Eicher 2002, 66–68). Here too, Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president—and himself a West Pointer, preferred to appoint former regular army officers (Stewart 2005, Ch. 9). This is in stark contrast to more junior officer appointments that occurred at the state level. Indeed, there is evidence that at this level former U.S. Army officers were viewed with skepticism as "hesitant, lukewarm secessionists" (Patterson 2002, 7). Accordingly, I anticipate that a similar mechanism would be at work on the rebel side—West Point graduates who had achieved a higher rank would be more likely to fight, given their likely ability to compete for general officer ranks—appointments to which were more centralized and privileged experience in the antebellum U.S. Army.

For both the Union and Confederate sides, a higher antebellum rank would make a West Point graduate more likely to fight given the manner in which appointments were managed in both armies. While we might expect more junior (and therefore likely younger and healthier) officers to be more likely to fight, the specifics by which the government and rebel sides' officer corps were expanded produced incentives for junior officers to sit out the conflict and mid-level and senior officers to fight.

H1. *West Pointers who had achieved a higher rank in the Antebellum period will be more likely to fight in the Civil War.*

Other hypotheses pertain to the civilian economic interests of West Point graduates. This is particularly salient for former officers. The scope of the argument includes veterans of the regular army who had retired. This group had substantial expertise as well as networks of other veterans and were a major factor on both sides in the American Civil War. On the U.S. side, 102 officers—including commanding general Ulysses S. Grant and commander of the Western Theater William T. Sherman—had

spent time as civilians prior to the Civil War. Ninety-two former officers serving on the Confederate side also fit this description (Newell 2014).

This group spent significant time in civilian careers. As such, this group is likely to have established broader economic interests than career officers who were on active duty at the time that the war broke out. How did the stakes of the war affect the decisions of this group? The preservation of slavery was the primary motivation for secession as evidenced by the slavery focus in the published "Declarations of Causes," the predominance of slavery in the Southern economy (Wright 1978), and strong impact of slave ownership on enlistment in the Confederate army (Hall, Huff, and Kuriwaki 2019). I argue that West Pointers who had significant economic interests in Southern cash crops—such as sugar, indigo, rice, tobacco, and cotton—which were dependent on slave labor—would be less likely to side with the Union and more likely to side with the Confederacy. In contrast, those without such interests would be more likely to side with the U.S.

H2a. *West Pointers who had a significant economic interest in Southern cash crops will be less likely to side with the Union.*
H2b. *West Pointers who had a significant economic interest in Southern cash crops will be more likely to side with the Confederacy.*

Data

To test these hypotheses, I collected a new dataset on military officer characteristics and decision-making using graduates of the United States Military Academy—"West Point"—for the classes of 1802–1861. All graduates who were alive as of the firing on Fort Sumter by Confederate forces on 12 April 1861 were coded. Each graduate-observation was human-coded using *Cullum's Register*—a detailed biographical record of all West Point graduates first published in 1891. All entries contain at least the following information: *class year and class rank*; *state of origin and appointment*—i.e., the state in which a graduate was born and the state from which each graduate was appointed (not necessarily the same); *details of military career*—including commissioning branch, ranks held, dates of commission, military units and postings, deployments; date of resigning commission and returning to civilian life; *details of civilian career*, including places and dates of residence and jobs held.

Critically, each entry records whether or not the graduate fought in the Civil War on either the Union or Confederate side. A graduate who fought for the Confederacy is noted to have "Joined in the Rebellion…against the United States." Further, the date on which each graduate made the decision to join can be inferred from the date that they resigned their commission. Graduates who fought for the Union are recorded to have "Served during the Rebellion of the Seceding States." Graduates who did not serve on either side can be identified through the timeline of their civilian careers in the *Register* and the absence of explicit statement about participation in the rebellion. The data collection yielded a dataset of 1144 graduates who were alive on 12 April 1861.

The dependent variable is trichotomous, indicating fighting for the U.S. or the Confederacy, respectively, during the conflict, or not fighting.[6] Table 1 shows the sides that Northern, Southern, and Border State graduates took during the war. Here we see that while the majority take sides according to their regional affiliation, a substantial number made choices in contradiction to the "war between the states" logic. More than a quarter of West Pointers either sat out the war or fought against their state of origin.

Independent variables related to civilian economic interests and military careers were also derived from *Cullum's Register*. The argument anticipates that all things being equal an officer will be more likely to fight in the Civil War if they hold higher rank. I coded indicators for First Lieutenant, Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, or General—with the base category being the lowest rank, Second Lieutenant. This coding allows each rank to have its own effect and does not assume that the effect of moving up one rank is the same across the spectrum of ranks. The rank indicators include both brevet and regular commissions.[7]

For civilian economic interests, *Cullum's Register* includes information on civilian careers of graduates if they resigned from the army in the Antebellum. Separate indicators for different professions were coded. To test hypotheses related to a graduate's civilian economic interests in Southern cash crop we coded an indicator if the graduate was recorded as having spent time as a "planter" (a plantation owner) or held any job related to the production, processing, sale, or export of cotton, indigo, rice, sugar, or tobacco.

A large number of additional controls variables were coded for each graduate. First, we coded a counter for the number of years elapsed from graduating and the start of the Civil War. Older graduates would be less likely to fight in the civil war, given possible infirmities. Further older graduates would have had more time to advance in rank and also to develop significant civilian economic interests. Relatedly, we coded indicators for which states graduates had been posted during their military careers—i.e., in Northern states, Southern states, or Border states. We also coded indicators for in what non-state territories graduates had been posted. We coded separate indicators for a northern territory or southern territory. This was coded based on whether slavery was legal in the territory. In territories in which slavery was legal, the territory was considered "Southern."[8]

Prior combat experience may affect both decisions to fight in the Civil War, as well as antebellum rank, given the awarding of brevet ranks for battlefield performance. Many prominent West Pointers had extensive combat experience during the Mexican-American War (1846–48), others fought in the "Florida Wars" (or "Seminole Wars") between 1816 and 1858, conflicts surrounding the independence of Texas from Mexico (1835–36), and conflicts related to the forced removal of Native American tribes from the Southeastern United States. We coded an indicator for whether or not the graduate had antebellum war experience.

I included also separate indicators for the graduate's commissioning branch. Upon graduating officers were commissioned in either the Artillery, Cavalry, Engineers, Infantry, or Ordinance Branches. Commission assignments were given based on class

rank, and the higher ranked graduates tended to select into the Engineering or Ordinance branches—with the lower ranked graduates selecting into the three combat branches. Branch may exert an effect independent of class rank, because class rank is not a perfect predictor of branch assignment,[9] and because the nature of the duties assigned to each branch in the Antebellum period differed substantially. For example, the typical antebellum infantry or cavalry officer's time was largely spent divided between difficult and brutal counter-insurgency warfare and quartermaster duties (Newell 2014). In contrast, Engineering officers enjoyed a much greater variety of professional experiences and opportunities, being engaged in a variety of civil and military engineering projects throughout the country—not just frontier posts.[10] These differing opportunities may have exerted different effects on the development of personal and professional networks, career trajectory, and subsequent decision-making.

I included also indicators capturing aspects of graduate's civilian lives for those who resigned their commissions prior to the Civil War. Similar to the indicators for military postings, we coded indicators for civilian residence in a Northern, Southern, or Border state—and Northern or Southern territories. Based on the description of careers in graduates' biographies, we coded separate indicators for the following civilian professions—in addition to "Southern cash crops": engineer, farmer (other than planter), businessman, and civilian service in local, state, or federal government.

I coded regional origin indicators—North, South, and Border—based on the state from which they were appointed to West Point. I considered Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Tennessee to be Southern States. I considered the Border States to be Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware. All other state appointments were considered to be Northern. There were also "at large" appointments that were made at the national level by such offices as the President and Vice President. In these cases, assignment to the Southern, Border, or Northern samples was done based on the graduate's state of birth. In the primary analyses, I included an indicator for Southern—with the base category being Northern or Border origin. A table of descriptive statistics can be found in the appendix.

Given the trichotomous dependent variable, I used multinomial logit with the base category set as "not fighting" in the Civil War. I pooled Southern, Northern, and Border State graduates, controlling for regional origin. I clustered standard errors based on state of origin.

Results

Below I present the results from the multinomial logit analyses of all West Point graduates alive at the start of the civil war. Table A2 in the appendix shows coefficient estimates. In the main body, I present plots of the substantive effects of the independent variables. The results here reflect a model with all control variables included—a model with only the independent variables and an indicator for whether or not the graduate was appointed from a Southern state do not yield substantively different results.

Figure 1 shows the changes in the predicted probability of a West Point graduate either (a) not fighting, (b) fighting for the Union, or (c) fighting for the Confederacy based on rank.[11] The predicted average effect is estimated for each rank relative to the base rank category of Second Lieutenant. The estimates are color-coded to show the expected effect—change in percentage points—on the probability of each of the three possible outcomes for a graduate at the onset of the Civil War. Where the confidence intervals cross "0", the effect is indistinguishable from zero. Where the effect for a rank on "Did not fight" (green) is negative and significant while the effect on siding with the Union (blue) or Confederacy (orange) is not significant, we can infer that holding that rank makes a graduate more likely to fight in the Civil War, but there is not a statistically significant difference in whether the holder of the rank fights for the Union or Confederacy. Figure 1(b) and 1(c) are generated from an interaction of the rank indicators with an indicator for whether the West Point graduate was an active-duty officer at the outset of the civil war.

Figure 1(a) suggest that on average and holding other factors constant, West Pointers who had achieved field grade rank or higher would be more likely to fight. Specifically, relative to the base category, being any rank higher than captain makes a graduate between 10 and 15 percentage points *less likely to sit out the war*, on average. For ranks higher than major, the evidence suggests that this is more strongly felt among graduates who side with the Union—e.g., a graduate who is a Lieutenant Colonel is on average 12.64 percentage points more likely to fight for the Union, while not being significantly more or less likely to fight for the Confederacy.

Figure 1(b) and 1(c) parse these results by whether or not the graduates held an active commission at the onset of the civil war. These analyses demonstrate that for active-duty officers, lieutenant colonels and higher were more likely to fight rather than sit out the war (as indicated by the negative and significant effect for "Did not fight"). Rank for active-duty officers, did not, however, appear to exert a significant effect on whether a graduate subsequently fought for the Confederacy or Union—except for generals. Generals were not only more likely to fight, they were substantially more likely to do so on the Union side. Officers who had resigned in the Antebellum tended to break more clearly for the Union if they had achieved a higher field grade rank. Majors or higher were much more likely to fight in the war, and for Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels, they were more likely to do so for the Union. In sum, these results suggest strong support for H1—that higher ranking graduates would be more likely to fight in the Civil War. This effect is clearly evident for field grade and higher ranks. There is also evidence that higher ranking officers were more likely to fight for the Union.

The effect of rank being greater for fighting for the Union may reflect several factors. First is professional socialization. Those who have spent more time in the US Army and have achieved a higher rank—rank being tied heavily to time in service—may feel more loyalty to the Army. This may also contribute to some graduates who would otherwise fight for the Confederacy, choosing to sit out the war rather than fight for the other side. However, this possible explanation is explored in the following section—with strong evidence that rank exerts an effect independent of time in service.

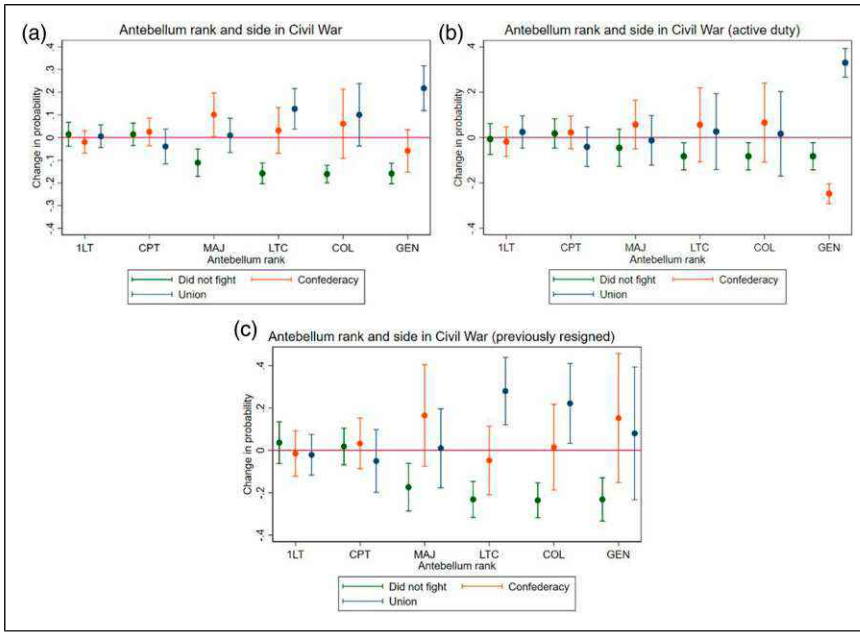

Figure 1. (a–c) Antebellum rank and fighting in the American Civil War.

Another possible factor is self-interest—in line with the overall logic of the theory. The assessment of West Pointers may have been that the Union, with its greater share of industrial might and population, would be more likely to win. Therefore, siding with the Union would be a better choice professionally. Feeling even among Secessionists was not unanimously optimistic. The Confederate States' Secretary of State at the time and later Brigadier General in the Confederate States Army, Robert Toombs, wrote to Jefferson Davis about the firing on Fort Sumter "[I]t is suicide, murder, and will lose us every friend in the North. You will wantonly strike a hornet's nest…Legions now quiet will swarm out and sting us to death. It is unnecessary….It is fatal." (Current 1961, 367–68). Toomb's assessment of the South's chances may have been shared by enough West Pointers as to dilute the effect of rank on joining the Confederate side.

Across the analyses, the (negative) estimated average effect of holding a rank of major or higher on not fighting ranges from between 11 and 16 percentage points, holding other factors constant (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the effect of other factors in the model related to military career. Essentially the impact of holding a field grade or higher rank is comparable or greater than the effect of any other factor in a graduate's military career.

Turning to H2 and H2b, Figure 3 demonstrates that antebellum involvement in Southern cash crops made a West Pointer significantly more likely to sit out the war and significantly less likely to fight for the Union. On average and holding other factors

constant, involvement in Southern cash crops made a West Pointer 39.71 percentage points less likely to fight for the Union and also made a West Pointer 13.66 percentage points more likely to sit out of war. The effect of cash crops on fighting for the Confederacy is positive but is not significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.087$). This may stem in part from the tendency of some slave-owners in the Confederacy to have sat out the war. Indeed, in 1862, the Confederate Congress passed the "20 Slave Law"—which exempted from military service one white male for every 20 enslaved people on a plantation. The ostensible purpose of the law was to prevent a rebellion among the enslaved population. It had the effect of exempting many wealthy slave owners from military service (Foner 2011). It is likely that even prior to the law's passing in 1862, some West Point graduates who were plantation-owners in the seceding states made a similar calculus.

Figure 4 compares the impact of cash crops with that of Southern origin, military posting, and civilian residence. The effect of cash crops involvement on the probability of fighting for the Union is comparable to either Southern residence or Southern origin. The same can be said of fighting for the Confederacy—though the effect does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. In a conflict popularly understood to be driven by regional loyalty, the economic roots of the conflict exert an impact comparable to that of geography.

Figure 5(a) to (c) show the results from a model which interacts the cash crops indicator both with an indicator for the graduate having Southern origin and one for having a Border State origin (coefficients in appendix). The effect of cash crops for graduates from Southern states is to dramatically reduce the likelihood of siding with the Union, but the effect on fighting for the Confederacy fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = 0.152$). Strikingly, for graduates with a Border state origin, the impact of cash crops involvement is more pronounced. Here, we see involvement in Southern cash crops makes a graduate more than 50 percentage points more likely to fight for the Confederacy and almost 40 percentage points less likely to fight for the Union. This is a particularly critical population to examine, as their regional origin did not necessarily predispose them to join either side. Here the effect of involvement in cash crops was stronger in encouraging support for the Confederacy and discouraging support for the Union relative to both native Southerners and Northerners.

For Northerners, cash crops involvement has an effect that is anticipated by the theory. The effect of cash crops does exert a large negative effect on fighting for the Union that is significant at conventional levels despite the large confidence intervals surrounding the estimated effect: a reduction of almost 50 percentage points in the probability of fighting for the Union ($p = 0.049$). The anticipated effects of cash crops involvement for Northern West Pointers on sitting out the war and fighting for the Confederacy are, respectively, an approximately 10 percentage points increase ($p = 0.117$), and a 38-percentage point increase ($p = 0.054$).

Table 2 shows the rates of fighting for the Confederacy versus sitting out the war or fighting for the Union among only Northern graduates who previously had relocated to

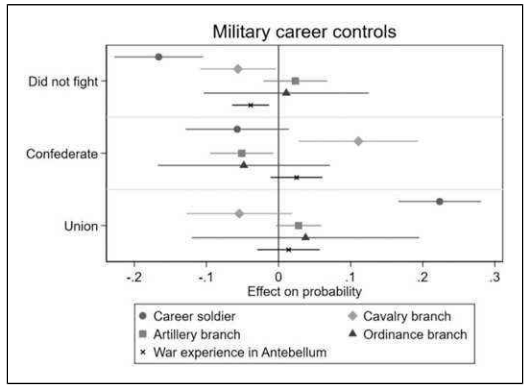

Figure 2. Effect of military career control variables.

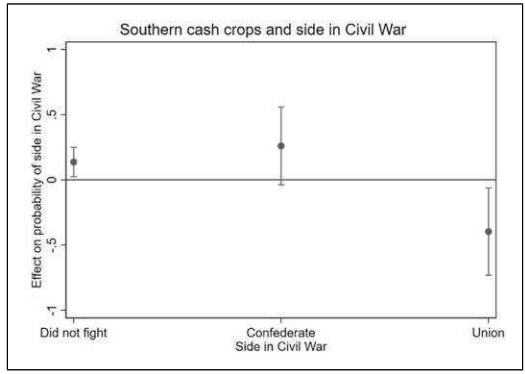

Figure 3. Southern cash crops involvement and fighting in the American civil war.

the South as civilians. *No transplanted Northerner with ties to cash crops fought for the Union*—half of this group sat out the war, and half fought for the Confederacy. However, among Northern transplants to the South without ties to cash crops, more fought for the Union than fought for the Confederacy. Involvement in the slave economy was a central driver of wartime decision-making even for a group who were likely already predisposed to the South, given that they had voluntarily relocated there.

It is instructive also to compare the rates of fighting for the Confederacy for Northern transplants with native Southerners. Table 3 shows the different rates of fighting for Southern natives conditional on cash crops involvement and reveals that the rate is essentially the same as for Northern transplants—50% of Northern transplants involved in cash crops fought for the Confederacy while 48.78% of Southern natives involved in cash crops did. Northern transplants tended to not have family connections to the slave economy—except through marriage—and generally became involved later in life. Put

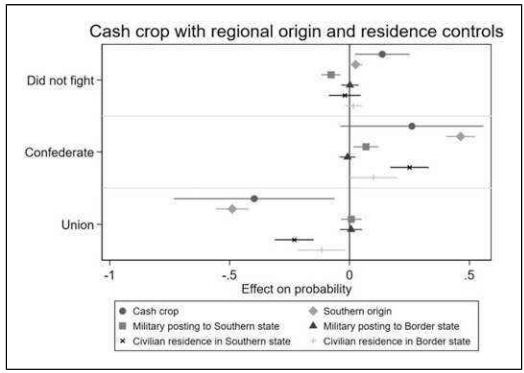

Figure 4. Cash crops involvement compared with Southern residency and origin.

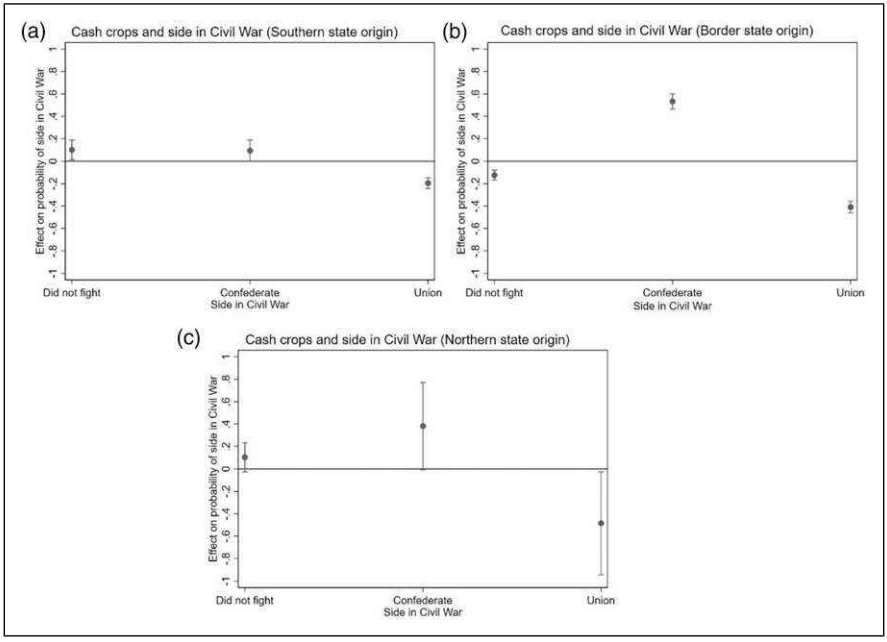

Figure 5. (a–c): Effect of Southern cash crops conditional on regional origin.

differently, they selected into the slave economy in a way distinct from native Southerners—many of whom may have inherited wealth generated from slavery. The essentially equal rates of fighting for the Confederacy between these groups suggests an equivalent economic motive for each group.

Table 2. Cash Crops Involvement and Fighting in the Civil War (Northern Transplants to the South).

	No Cash Crops Involvement	Cash Crops Involvement	Totals
Did not fight	20 (42.55%)	6 (50%)	26 (44.07%)
Confederacy	13 (27.66%)	6 (50%)	19 (32.20%)
Union	14 (29.79%)	0	14 (23.73%)
Total	47	12	59

Table 3. Cash Crops Involvement and Fighting in the Civil War (Southern Natives).

	No Cash Crops Involvement	Cash Crops Involvement	Totals
Did not fight	192 (46.04%)	21 (51.22%)	213 (46.51%)
Confederacy	175 (41.97%)	20 (48.78%)	195 (42.58%)
Union	50 (11.99%)	0	50 (10.92%)
Total	417	41	458

For those involved in cash crops who fought for the Confederacy, the average number of years from graduation from West point to becoming involved in cash crops was 7.59 years. For those involved in cash crops that sat out the war, it was nearly twice that (14.5 years). This suggests that among those West Pointers who became involved in cash crops, those that became involved at a younger age were more likely to fight for the Confederacy. Later-in-life involvement seems to be associated with sitting out the war.

A discussion of the effect of control variables is in the appendix. Southern and Northern origin or residence make graduates more likely to fight for the Confederacy or Union, respectively. Officers on active-duty at the time the war breaks out were more likely to remain loyal to the Union. Results for commissioning branch are generally indeterminate, with the exception that cavalry officers are more likely to side with the Confederacy. Class year also exerts as significant influence, with older graduates more likely to sit out the war.

Alternative Explanations and Robustness

I conduct a range of robustness checks—the details of which can be found in the appendix. First, I reran the analyses without any control variables except for regional origin, and the results do not change meaningfully. Second, while I argue that competency considerations drove the appointment process for general officers in the Union and Confederate armies, social networks may have also factored into general officer appointments (e.g., Arnold, Chatagnier, and Hollibaugh (2020)). This may have been particularly salient on the Confederate side as the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis—who had broad discretion in the appointment of general officers—was himself

a West Pointer from the class of 1828. I accordingly add to the analyses an indicator for a graduate of the classes that overlapped with Davis while he was at West Point. This indicator is not significant in the analyses and does not substantively alter the main findings.

Third, A potential alternative explanation for the impact of rank is sense of duty. Time in service was a significant determinant of rank in the Antebellum US Army in which regular promotions were based on seniority. It is important to disentangle the impact of rank from these other factors. Critically, in the analyses that examines at the impact of rank on West Pointers who had resigned their commission in the antebellum, we see a strong impact of prior rank on the probability of fighting—consistent with the theory's expectations. For this group, the counterargument that dedication to the military profession, rather than opportunities presented by rank, drove the decision to fight is less salient. This group were civilians who had chosen to leave the Army prior to when the Civil War began, but through prior rank, had the opportunity to present themselves as likely general officer candidates. As an added check, I rerun the main analyses with a control for the number of years that a graduate was on active duty in the military—in order to separate the effect of rank from that of time spent in the military profession. These analyses do not yield substantively different results than those shown in Figure 1. If the effect of rank was driven by some mechanism other than professional incentives, such as professionalism or sense of duty, we would expect the inclusion of the time in service control to significantly alter the findings with regards to rank, which they do not. I also replaced the individual rank indicators with a continuous variable for rank—which carries with it the assumption that the effect of moving up any rank will be the same across the range of ranks—here the results do not substantively change either.

Another factor to consider is the distinction between brevet ranks and regular ranks. While brevet ranks endowed the holder with responsibilities and some privileges commensurate with the higher ranks—critically, they did not grant a higher salary. Given this distinction, I reran the main analyses with the rank indicators recoded so that they capture the graduate's highest *regular* rank, discounting brevet ranks.[12] The results of these analyses are available in the appendix and do not show any substantive change in the main findings.

Relatedly, while West Pointers as a group represent a concentration of military expertise for both sides in the Civil War, there is variation in the merit of this group. Does relative standing in a West Point class influence whether or not a West Pointer fought and for what side? I add to the model a measure for the graduate's class ranking—which the academy issued based on grades and disciplinary records. Class rank was a major determinant of initial branch assignment and posting—factors that had a substantial impact on a West Pointers subsequent military career. Accordingly, in models that include these control variables, class rank does not exert an independent

Table 4. Support for Hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Supported?
High rank increases probability of fighting	Yes
Cash crops reduces likelihood of fighting for USA	Yes
Cash crops increases likelihood of fighting for CSA	Mixed: Strongest for border state graduates

effect on civil war side. Similarly, when class rank is interacted with antebellum rank, so that the specific effect of class rank for different antebellum ranks can be examined, there is also no discernable conditional impact of class rank at different levels of antebellum rank.

Conclusion

In this article I argue that career and economic motivations are major drivers of the decision-making of military elites regarding whether and on what side to fight in a civil war. I use new data on the participation in the American Civil War and antebellum careers of West Point graduates to test my expectations. Table 4 summarizes the support for the hypotheses.

I found strong evidence that higher ranking graduates were more likely to participate in the Civil War—in line with the logic that these graduates would be better positioned to compete for high ranks. I found strongest evidence that higher ranking officers were more likely to side with the Union and more modest evidence in support of the expectation that higher ranking officers would be more likely to side with the Confederacy. The disproportionate impact on fighting from the Union may stem from a third factor, such as individual evaluations by prospective officers that the seceding states' chances of victory were slim. For example, Major General Winfield Scott—a Virginian who remained loyal to the United States and designed the "Anaconda Plan" to defeat the Confederacy, wrote in a letter to Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Seward on 3 March 1861—more than a month prior to the firing on Fort Sumter—that a competent general could conquer the "seceding states" in 2–3 years with "frightful" destruction for the secessionist side.[13] Indeed, Scott's assessment echoes the Confederacy's own Secretary of State's pessimistic assessment.

I find strong evidence that involvement in Southern cash crops made West Pointers significantly less likely to side with the Union, regardless of regional origin, and more mixed evidence that it made them more likely to side with the Confederacy—that latter being most strongly supported for Border State graduates. However, for all regions, the effect of involvement in cash crops on fighting for the Confederacy was positive and approached significance at the $p = 0.10$ level. This aspect of the results is explained by the fact that for those with a Northern or Southern state origin who were involved in cash crops, a non-trivial portion opted to sit out the war. This group of native Southerners and Northern transplants may have held a belief that as plantation owners, their role in the

conflict was to prevent a rebellion by enslaved people—a belief that led to the passing by the Confederate Congress of the "20 Slave Law" in 1862.

This article significantly contributes to our understanding of fragmentation in civil wars. While the individual choices of combatants are a major concern of the literature, we have a weaker understanding of how military elites decide whether to participate and on what side. This is a pivotal group to understand—given its expertise in violence, access to military material, and networks of trained individuals. While factors such as ideology, regional affiliation, and ethnic cleavages matter, this article provides evidence that, like society more generally, military officers will be motivated by their self-interest: the economic stakes in the central incompatibility of the conflict and opportunities for professional advancement.

These findings have applicability beyond the case of the American Civil War. Professional and economic incentives can be used to better understand the decision-making of military elites in contemporary civil wars. For example, offers of high rank, housing and other economic benefits were used by Russia to induce the defection of high-ranking Ukrainian military officers to the Crimean separatist cause in 2014.[14] In the Syrian civil war, for some officers, economic incentives and perquisites provided by the Assad regimes have seemingly overriding the sectarian dimension of the conflict, leading to Sunni officers unexpectedly remaining loyal to the regime (Khaddour n.d.).

While this article constitutes an important step forward in our understanding of the behavior of military elites in civil war, future research should examine how does the potential participation of the military in a civil war affect the likelihood that it erupts in the first place. Rebels may be emboldened by likely military fragmentation. In contrast, if rebels anticipate a military loyal to the government, they may avoid escalating conflict. A government that anticipates sympathies to rebel movements within the military may seek accommodation with rebels. Military fragmentation is likely to be a critical—and understudied—factor in overall patterns of civil war onset and escalation.

Author Note

Previous versions were presented at the Civil-Military Relations Seminar at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, and the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association (2020), the International Studies Association (2021), and the Peace Science Society (2019).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Risa Brooks, Michael Joseph, Michael Kenwick, Max Margulies, Luwei Ying, Theodore McLauchlin, Adam Scharpf, and Robie White, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their feedback on earlier versions of this article. Thank you to Lupita Contreras, Douglas Jensen, Xiaofeng Chen, Andrew Miller, and Evan Morrison for their assistance in collecting the data.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Peter B. White https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9143-129X

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. BBC. 3/24/2014. "Ukrainian forces withdraw from Crimea." https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26713727. Accessed 1/22/2022; Reuters. 7/24/2017. "Why Ukrainian Forces Gave up Crimea without a Fight." https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-ukraine-crisis-crimea-annexatio-idCAKBN1A90G0-OCATP.
2. Relatedly Lehmann and Zhukov (2019) find that unit-level decisions to surrender or fight on in war are largely driven by the precedent set by other units.
3. Anderson, John Lee. 2/16/2015. "The Unravelling: In a failing state, an anti-Islamist general mounts a divisive campaign." *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/unravelling. Accessed 6/30/2020.
4. For example, John C. Pemberton, a general in the Confederate army, was a Pennsylvanian.
5. Lincoln did appoint general whose appointments were intended to increase political support, but in the early conflict, the majority were West Pointers (Stewart 2005, Ch. 9)
6. "Not fighting" captures graduates who had resigned and did not join either military when the war began or graduates who resigned at the outset of the war but did not fight.
7. "Brevet" promotions were given for battlefield merit and endowed the holder with additional responsibilities, but not some of the privileges of a regular rank. See the appendix for discussion.
8. The territories in which slavery was legal were territories that would later become states of the Confederacy—e.g., Florida before it was admitted as a state in 1845. Also included as "southern" territories were Utah, New Mexico, and "Indian Territory" (later Oklahoma). All other territories were considered "Northern."
9. The correlation between class rank and each of the branch indicators ranges from an absolute value of 0.12 and 0.55.
10. See Smithsonian Institution. 1/11/2004. "West Point in the Making of America, 1802–1918." https://americanhistory.si.edu/westpoint/history_2b2.html. Accessed 3/19/2022.

11. Table A2 in the Appendix shows the coefficient estimates for the multinomial logit analyses, which are in relation to a base category (not fighting)—the figures here show changes in the predicted probability of each of the three outcomes occurring based on different values for the rank indicators.
12. This resulted in 32 graduate's ranks being recoded. A small number of cases where the highest rank held was a brevet commission of second lieutenant bestowed upon graduate from West Point were left unchanged.
13. Winfield Scott. "Winfield Scott to William H. Seward." Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College. https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/35246.
14. Reuters. 7/24/2017. "Why Ukrainian Forces Gave up Crimea without a Fight." https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-ukraine-crisis-crimea-annexatio-idCAKBN1A90G0-OCATP

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