

Understanding Victory

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Why Political Institutions Matter

In our book, *Democracies at War*, we asked the question: Why do democracies tend to win the wars they fight? We confirmed this pattern, first noted by David Lake in his “Powerful Pacifists” article, using statistical tests and numerous historical cases.¹ Notably, this phenomenon confounds the traditional realpolitik fear that democratic liberalism is a luxury that states may be unable to afford. Our basic answer to the question is that democracies tend to win because they put themselves in a position to do so. The constraints that flow from democratic political structures lead the executives of liberal democracies to hesitate before starting wars, particularly wars where victory on the battlefield appears to be less than clear-cut.

Democracies’ willingness to start wars only against relatively weaker states says nothing about the actual military efficiency or capacity of democratic states. Rather, it says that when they do start a fight, they are more likely to pick on relatively weaker target states. We also find, however, that in addition to this “selection effects” explanation of democratic success, democratic armies enjoy a small advantage on the battlefield.

Michael Desch, a prominent realist scholar, reviews these claims in his article “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters.”² His assertion that regime type is irrelevant to the probability of military victory is consistent with the broader realist agenda, which argues that domestic politics matters little in the formation of foreign policy or the interactions between states. Desch makes a valuable contribution in advancing the debate over this question. There are many points about which Desch and we agree. Democracies do

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1. Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); and David A. Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 24–37.

2. Michael C. Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 5–47. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

not win wars because of economic superiority, greater public support during wartime, or having more or better allies. “Realist” factors such as military strategy, leadership, and industrial capabilities directly account in part for the war outcomes we observe. Regarding the irrelevance of regime type, however, we fail to find Desch’s claims convincing because his analysis contains serious errors in both logic and method. In the next section, we review our central argument and explain how best to test it empirically. In the following section, we take up and rebut Desch’s critiques of our primary data set. We then address some of Desch’s other critiques.

Our Theory and Our Tests

How have democracies managed to compile their impressive wartime record? Generally, there are three possible answers. First, they might simply pick on weaker states, thereby arriving on the battlefield with more of the material determinants of victory. We call this argument the “selection effects” explanation. Because democratic political institutions make elected leaders more vulnerable to losing office, their foreign policies are different from those of leaders of other kinds of states. Specifically, they tend to represent more closely the values and preferences of the people than do the foreign policies of more authoritarian states. States where the elites must generate the contemporaneous consent of the people tend to avoid starting wars in which they have only a moderate or low chance of victory, so that when they go to war, they win.

Second, democracies might be materially more powerful. Their armed forces might fight with greater efficiency or better strategies, they might be able to extract relatively more resources from their societies, or they might choose allies that are relatively more reliable or powerful. The third possibility is that both of these explanations are partly correct.

The theories are disarmingly simple. Testing them is also quite straightforward. To test our theories, we examined all interstate wars that occurred between 1815 and 1985. We also looked closely at a number of specific cases to be sure that we were not spuriously attributing causal power to the correlations we uncovered. To test the selection effects theory, we looked in particular at the record of all war initiators, as the theory implies that democratic war initiators, being more risk averse, should be more likely than autocratic war initiators to win the wars they start. We conducted two kinds of statistical tests, cross tabulations and regression analysis, where we controlled for many of the material factors that determine the outcomes of wartime battles.

Desch carefully and accurately replicates these analyses. Unfortunately, he then makes a crucial error in logic and research design. After demonstrating that our basic findings are robust, he returns to the data set to judge whether, in his view, the cases are “fair tests.” In doing so, he excludes more than 85 percent of the cases in which democracies were the initiators because he says these were not “fair fights.” He then reestimates the statistical models and finds that democracy no longer correlates with victory. This is not surprising, but it is completely beside the point. By dropping all of the “unfair fights” from the data set, he has excluded many of the cases that our theory predicts will be the wars that democracies should win. As we explain below, our selection effects theory predicts that we should see precisely the type of cases that Desch omits—instances where the democratic war initiator is much more powerful than the target state.

To test the second theory—that democracies win because they fight wars more effectively—we again took two statistical approaches, cross tabulations and regression analysis. In our cross tabulations, we focused on target states (i.e., those states that find themselves at war when other states initiate attacks against them). If democracies are more powerful than other kinds of states, as well as more prudent, then we would expect them to do better than other kinds of states even when targeted. This was exactly what we found. Democratic targets are more likely to win than are other kinds of targets. To ensure that this finding was not a result of some other determinant of military victory randomly correlated with democracy levels, we also estimated a sophisticated regression model that allowed us to control for numerous material and ideational factors such as military capabilities, alliance contributions, and military strategy. Even with a large set of control variables, we still found that democratic targets outfought autocratic targets.

These results created something of a puzzle, because even when we controlled for many of the factors that military historians argue account for war outcomes, we still found a small military advantage that we could attribute to a state’s level of democratization. In other words, even when we control for the number of troops, measures of technology, strategy, alliance contributions, and war matériel, democracies are still more likely than other kinds of states to win wars. Even when other states target them, democracies seem to be more powerful than their opponents; but there is no single factor in our war data set to which we could attribute their winning record. Therefore, we looked to other sources of data that would let us investigate democracies’ performance at the

level of the individual soldier. There, we found that soldiers of democracies are more likely to take the initiative and enjoy somewhat better leadership; also, they are less likely to surrender on the battlefield.

We remain confident in our findings. Importantly, an array of studies using a variety of data sets has produced findings consistent with our theoretical perspective that the constraints imposed by democratic political institutions push elected leaders to fight short, successful, low-cost wars and to avoid potential foreign policy disasters. Specifically, these studies have found that public opinion is generally reasonable, rational, and stable, thus providing a reliable foundation for foreign policy debate. Following military defeat, democratic leaders lose power faster than do autocratic leaders. Fear of eroding public support leads democracies to tend to fight shorter wars with fewer casualties. Moreover, this fear causes democracies to choose military strategies that promise rapid victory with low costs. Closely related to our findings about wartime performance, the aversion to foreign policy failure means that when democracies initiate foreign policy crises short of war, they usually emerge with diplomatic success. Our work on democratic wartime performance is also consistent with the institutional explanations of democracies' tendency not to fight each other.³ Last, our research findings have withstood sophisticated methodological challenges.⁴

3. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (December 1995), pp. 841–855; Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*; Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary Segura, "War, Casualties, and Public Opinion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 1998), pp. 278–300; Dan Reiter and Curtis Meek, "Determinants of Military Strategy, 1903–1994: A Quantitative Empirical Test," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June 1999), pp. 363–387; Christopher F. Gelpi and Michael Griesdorf, "Winners or Losers? Democracies in International Crisis, 1918–94," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (September 2001), pp. 633–661; D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, "Research Design and Estimator Choices in the Analysis of Interstate Dyads: When Decisions Matter," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (October 2000), pp. 653–685; Brett Ashley Leeds and David R. Davis, "Beneath the Surface: Regime Type and International Interactions, 1953–1978," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (January 1999), pp. 5–21; Dan Reiter and Erik R. Tillman, "Public, Legislative, and Executive Constraints on the Democratic Initiation of Conflict," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (August 2002), pp. 810–826; and Bruce M. Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

4. David H. Clark and William Reed, "A Unified Model of War Onset and Outcomes," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (February 2003), pp. 69–91; and William Reed and David H. Clark, "War Initiators and War Winners: The Consequences of Linking Theories of Democratic War Success," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (June 2000), pp. 378–395.

Desch's Specific Data Critiques

Desch begins his critique by successfully replicating our results. He then sets out to disprove our claims in two steps. First, he claims that more than two-thirds of our observations do not qualify as wars suitable for testing our propositions. Then, having eviscerated the data set, he tries to show that our findings about democracy and victory fail under scrutiny. In this section, we examine Desch's claims and rebut each of them, restoring confidence in the power of our original results.

REASSEMBLING OUR DATA

Desch outlines six potential problems with our data leading him to drop the majority of observations from his subsequent analysis. We disagree both with his general reasoning, as we pointed out above, and with these supposed problems.

Desch's main assertion is that we should drop wars between mismatched opponents. The existence of these cases, however, proves our selection effects theory that democracies seek out gross mismatches and avoid conflicts where their chances of victory are lower, starting wars only when they are confident they will win. Hence, they must be included in any fair analysis. By taking into consideration an array of control variables for material factors, we can safely include power mismatches in the analysis and still reliably estimate the independent effect of democracy.

Second, Desch asserts that our disaggregation of the data—that is, separating single large wars such as World War II into multiple smaller ones to improve coding accuracy—can bias the test in favor of our theory (pp. 13–14, n. 25). In principle, this might be true. As Desch notes, however, more of the cases that we create through disaggregation oppose our theory than favor it.

Third, Desch notes that democracies have sometimes won wars with powerful autocratic allies and, apparently assuming that wars are won only by single causes, concludes that these democracies should not receive any credit for these victories. We maintain that war outcomes are determined by multiple outcomes, which demands the inclusion of multiple independent variables. We controlled for alliance contributions in our regression models, finding that belligerents are more likely to win when they are democratic as well as when they have powerful allies.

Fourth, Desch claims that some of our codings are questionable, thereby weakening our case. In particular, he takes issue with our interpretation of Is-

rael's performance in the 1969–70 War of Attrition and the 1982 Lebanon War. We coded the war outcomes in our data based on whether a side achieved its immediate military aims, a standard that matches well with our theory's predictions. We recognize that doing so involves making difficult judgment calls, but we stand by our coding decisions. In the War of Attrition, Israel won because it successfully repelled Egyptian attacks, and in the process suffered far fewer casualties than its opponent (260 Israeli dead and about 5,000 Egyptian dead).⁵ In the Lebanon War, Israel accomplished its immediate goals of occupying southern Lebanon and evicting the Palestinian Liberation Organization.⁶ Following Desch's standard of judging war outcomes based on long-term political gains or losses, we should then also consider many autocratic victories to be defeats, including the German victory over Belgium in World War I, all of the German victories in World War II, and the Japanese victories in East Asia in the 1930s.

Fifth, Desch argues that asymmetric interests explain war outcomes better than does regime type. Analyzing similar data, however, Allan Stam found in his book *Win, Lose, or Draw* that a control variable for asymmetric interests (or issue area) was not statistically significant. He also found that democracies were significantly more likely to win when controlling for the relative salience of the issue at stake for each side in a war.⁷ For democracies, leaders are aware that when lesser interests are at stake, public support is likely to erode quickly. They therefore either avoid these wars or design strategies for short, low-cost wars, such as those in the 1999 Kosovo campaign, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 1982 Lebanon War. When democratic leaders occasionally underestimate how quickly they can attain victory, as in Vietnam, the decline in public support pushes them to accept a draw rather than holding out for elusive victory.⁸

Sixth, Desch argues that in some instances states that we might think of as "democratic" are not true democracies. Unfortunately, he does not indicate which cases he means. In our analyses, we treat a state's level of democracy

5. Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500–2000*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2002), p. 638.

6. Eric Silver, *Begin: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), especially p. 229. On Israel meeting its military goals, see Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 230, 306.

7. Allan C. Stam III, *Win, Lose, or Draw: Domestic Politics and the Crucible of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 114–115.

8. D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam III, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy: A Combined Model of War Outcomes and Duration," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 1998), pp. 344–366; and Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, chap. 7.

as a continuous variable, and we draw our democracy measures from the POLITY III data set, a standard source that correlates highly with other measures of regime type.⁹

Why Including Control Variables Is Better Than Dropping Cases

Desch's research design approach is to look at "crucial cases" to devise "fair tests" (p. 13, n. 23), proposing that "a fair test of a theory involves identifying crucial cases that clearly rule out alternative explanations" (p. 13). To get such a "fair test," Desch eliminates 54 of the 75 wars that we studied, arguing that the factors that determined the outcomes of those excluded cases are not relevant to the central democracy hypothesis, meaning that we should ignore these cases. In taking this approach, Desch creates some confusion with his use of the term "crucial cases" in his discussion of our statistical analysis compared with how the term is usually used in the context of qualitative research. Harry Eckstein has defined a case as crucial if it "must closely fit a theory if one is to have confidence in the theory's validity."¹⁰ Eckstein has high standards for what would qualify as a true crucial case, noting that such cases "will not commonly occur and that one will need unusual luck to find them out economically if they exist."¹¹ Importantly, no single crucial case can decisively prove or disprove our theory, as we recognize that regime type affects war outcomes only probabilistically, and in every war there are always several other factors (some measurable and some not) that also determine outcomes. The combination of probabilistic hypotheses and multiple alternative factors makes statistical analysis preferable.

More generally, in qualitative case study research, the benefits of being able heuristically to develop new hypotheses and to examine closely the causal mechanisms in question offset the cost of limited generalizability imposed by a reduced sample size. Desch's decision to truncate the data set before conducting statistical analysis incurs the costs of a reduced sample without reaping these qualitative research benefits. This truncation is both unnecessary and dangerous. It is unnecessary because the standard practice of including control variables in statistical analysis enables one to discern accurately the individual

9. Keith Jagers and Ted Robert Gurr, "Tracking Democracy's Third Wave with the Polity III Data," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (November 1995), pp. 469–482.

10. Harry Eckstein, *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability, and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 157 (emphasis in original).

11. *Ibid.*

and independent effects of separate variables without having to delete large numbers of cases. It is dangerous because the omission of so much information is likely to bias the results, especially when the omission means removing most cases successfully predicted by one of the theories being tested, most notably cases in which democracies initiated mismatches that they won. Overall, if our choice is to address potentially confounding factors through control variables and other techniques or simply to eliminate most of our available data, the former approach is clearly superior; the latter is disingenuous and likely produces biased results.

Perhaps most surprising is that even if we use Desch's truncated data set, his null result that democracies are no more likely to win quickly collapses. In Table 1, we replicate the results for his models 1 and 2 (p. 17). Oddly, Desch included no control variables, only the variable "Democracy," despite his realist claim that material factors such as power explain war outcomes completely. Estimating a misspecified model by excluding relevant control variables leads to biased results. We agree with Desch that material factors matter. We therefore reran his analysis with a measure of military-industrial capabilities as a control. These results are in model 3.

When we include the military-industrial capabilities variable, democracy becomes statistically significant, and the coefficient increases more than two and a half times. Hence, even if one accepts all of Desch's critiques about the composition of the data set, his finding of no relationship between democracy and victory evaporates with the most basic improvement of his statistical model. We next consider some of Desch's narrower critiques of our work.

Desch's Other Critiques

Desch presents a series of other critiques of our claims. Space limitations force us to address only his primary points.

CORRELATION VERSUS CAUSATION?

Desch notes that correlation does not mean causation. In our book, we work through a number of historical illustrations to demonstrate the plausibility of our theory, looking at the 1971 Bangladesh War, the 1991 Gulf War, the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and others, demonstrating that the trappings of democracy directly affected the war outcomes in question.

In challenging our causal claims, Desch mentions the different military performances of Britain and France, noting in particular that France won 58 per-

Table 1. Reanalysis of Desch’s “Fair Fights” Data Set.

Variables	Model 1 (full democracies at war data set)	Model 2 (Desch “fair fights > 6” data set)	Model 3 (Desch “fair fights > 6” data set)
constant	0.1410283 (0.097201)	-0.3440138 (0.227655)	-1.508952** (0.4491125)
democracy	0.0359429** (0.0137452)	0.0364302 (0.0313352)	0.0942184* (0.0397805)
military-industrial capabilities	—	—	3.028452* (0.9551511)
pseudo R ²	0.0248	0.0332	0.2998
log likelihood	-133.04446	-21.342535	-15.456298
N	197	34	34

NOTE: We thank Michael Desch for sharing his data. Standard errors are robust; significance tests are two-tailed.

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.001$

cent of its wars before 1815 and 56 percent of its wars after; Britain, on the other hand, won 81 percent of its wars before and 89 percent after. The problem with this summary is that, for France in the post-1815 period, it includes wars fought while France was both democratic and autocratic. If one looks only at wars fought since 1815 in which France was democratic, the French record is 4 wins (Roman Republic, Boxer Rebellion, World War I, and Gulf War), 1 loss (World War II), and 2 draws (Sinai and the Sino-French War). This win/loss record of about 80 percent matches the overall record of democratic performance for our data set.

SUBSTANTIVE EFFECTS: SIGNIFICANT OR MARGINAL?

Desch next argues that even if democracy has a statistically significant effect on war outcomes, its substantive effect is so small that it should be considered irrelevant. Here he confuses the selection effects argument—that democracies win because they initiate war only when material conditions such as strategy, capabilities, and terrain are very favorable—and the war-fighting argument—that democracies prosecute wars more effectively. We agree with Desch that material and ideational factors such as industrial capabilities, technology, and

military strategy are the critical factors determining outcomes. However, this misses the point of our selection effects theory, where we argue that democracies are better or more willing to judge the effects of these factors. Using reliable estimates of their relative power, democracies start only those wars they are likely to win—that is, those wars in which they will enjoy an “unfair fight.” In *Democracies at War*, we demonstrate the very real advantages of democracies (and democratic initiators in particular). Table 2 reports these advantages.¹²

Desch provides some statistical analysis that the marginal effect of democracy is minor. However, his simplistic approach of looking at unit changes in individual variables to assess substantive significance is misguided, both because unit changes have different meanings for different variables (as the ranges in values of the variables differ widely), and because the presence of interaction variables makes it inappropriate to isolate the effects of individual variables. The estimates from our data predict that a democratic initiator (POLITY score of 10) has a 93 percent chance of winning, whereas a mostly authoritarian regime (POLITY score of -7) has only a 62 percent chance of winning, if one appropriately codes all democracy, initiation, and interaction variables and holds other values at their means.

DEMOCRACIES ARE BETTER DECISIONMAKERS

Desch disputes the proposition that democracies are better strategic decisionmakers. Our point is a bit more sophisticated than this, as we argue that democracies are both better and more risk-averse decisionmakers—each of these factors contributing to democratic success in war. His claim that there is no evidence that democracies make better choices is incorrect. Our study shows that among states that start wars, democracies are much more likely to win; relatedly, Jack Snyder found that democracies are less likely to engage in imperial overexpansion, and Christopher Gelpi and Michael Griesdorf found that, when democracies initiate international crises, they are more likely to win.¹³

Relatedly, Desch’s claim that Israel is a poor decisionmaker in the context of its foreign policy is like claiming that the glass is one-quarter empty instead three-quarters full. Like all states, democratic or otherwise, Israel has made its share of poor decisions. In the big picture, however, it is hard to consider

12. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 29, Table 2.1.

13. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Gelpi and Griesdorf, “Winners or Losers?”

Table 2. Winning Percentages for War Initiators and Targets by Regime Type.

	Dictatorships	Oligarchs	Democracies	Total
War Initiators				
Wins	21	21	14	56
Losses	14	15	1	30
Winning percentage	60%	58%	93%	65%
Targets				
Wins	16	18	12	46
Losses	31	27	7	65
Winning percentage	34%	40%	63%	41%

Israel's survival and prosperity while it is surrounded by extremely hostile neighbors anything other than a success. Israel has won every war it has fought since independence. It has also gone beyond military victory, concluding a peace agreement with one neighbor (Egypt) and taking long strides toward reconciliation with another (Jordan).

In comparison, consider the strategic record of Israel's neighbors. They have lost every war fought with Israel. Iraq initiated two disastrous invasions of neighbors, Iran and Kuwait. In 2003, it lost a third war because of its embrace of strategically unnecessary weapons of mass destruction. Desch describes Israel's national soul-searching following its victory in the 1973 Yom Kippur War as indicative of failure, but he again misses the point. This willingness to confront past errors to improve future policies explains why democracies make better decisions.

DEMOCRACIES ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Like Desch, we are skeptical that democracies win wars because of greater wealth, more or better allies, or greater societal commitment during wartime. We do argue that democratic armies enjoy higher levels of battlefield military effectiveness because their soldiers fight with higher initiative, their small-unit leadership is better, and democratic soldiers are less likely to surrender to the enemy. There is a considerable amount of historical scholarship supporting these points, especially in the Middle East.¹⁴ Even in Germany's greatest World

14. Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle*

War II victory, its rapid conquest of France, studies have shown that unit for unit French forces fought as well as German forces. Studies of the European campaign also indicate U.S. tactical superiority.¹⁵ Desch presents an extensive critique of the HERO data that we use, ultimately concluding that there is likely some measurement error, which would result in the attenuation of correlations found there. HERO is the only available quantitative data set on battles, however, and it suggests democratic superiority. We agree with Desch that the HERO data set is imperfect and that much work remains.

Conclusion

Winston Churchill put it best when he remarked, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” The historical record bears out Churchill’s point. Despite occasional errors, democracies enjoy much better wartime and foreign policy performance than do authoritarian states. Scholars can still be confident that democracies are more likely to win wars, especially the wars they initiate. They should not view democracy as a costly luxury that inevitably endangers the state, but rather as a set of institutional characteristics that improve a state’s foreign policy decisionmaking and battlefield performance.

East (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Risa Brooks, “Institutions at the Domestic/International Nexus: The Political-Military Origins of Strategic Integration, Military Effectiveness, and War,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2000.

15. Don W. Alexander, “Repercussions of the Breda Variant,” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring 1974), especially pp. 462–465; John Sloan Brown, “Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy and the Mythos of Wehrmacht Superiority: A Reconsideration,” *Military Affairs*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (January 1986), pp. 16–20; Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); and Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany—June 7, 1944–May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).