



## Shooting First

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With the failure to find stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and the continuing difficulties in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, it's reasonable to ask: Has a death blow been delivered to the idea of military preemption and, more broadly, to the idea of preventive wars? Has our experience in Iraq effectively removed from play a policy option that many here and abroad believed was the cornerstone of the Bush administration's new strategic doctrine?

For the foreseeable future, the Iraq war and its aftermath cannot help but put a hitch in the step of any president contemplating similar action. People can continue to debate whether the administration exaggerated the threat posed by Iraq's weapons programs, but there is no question that U.S. intelligence did not have a good enough handle on what was going on in Iraq. When the

director of the Central Intelligence Agency next tells a president that the case regarding a country's suspected weapons programs is a "slam-dunk," one can assume that that assessment will be greeted with far more skepticism.

Similarly, presidents will recall our current difficulties in putting Iraq back together and ask whether we have the talent, wherewithal or will to handle what follows a military intervention. Whether one supported the war, thinks that better planning for the war's aftermath could have precluded many of the current problems or believes that the president's vision for Iraq is still salvageable, the reality is that continuing troubles in Iraq will have an effect on presidential decision-making for years, especially when it comes to preemption and wars of prevention.

Nevertheless, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of preemption's death are greatly exaggerated.

The fact that the Bush administration is not looking to repeat Iraq any time soon is a straw man. The doctrine of preemption was never intended to be the hinge on which the administration hung its national security strategy.

While the Bush administration's public articulation of the strategy gave preemption greater weight than ever before, the strategy represented a relative shift in value, not a wholesale abandonment of previous security strategies. For example, deterrence remains an important element in the U.S. toolbox of statecraft, even while strategic defense and preemption have taken on more of the burden as the U.S. attempts to manage the new threats and technologies of the post-Cold War world. Nor does it mean that preemption is a policy option of the first resort. As national security advisor Condoleezza Rice has said, "The number of cases in which it might be justified will always be small."

Small as the number may be, preemption is still part of the picture. This should come as no surprise. Bush and his national security team did not invent the idea. As Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis has written in his new book, "Surprise, Security and the American Experience," preemption and preventive military action have a long history in U.S. statecraft.

The Monroe Doctrine rested on Washington's willingness to strike before being struck. Though preemption took a back seat to mutual deterrence during most of the Cold War, it remained a policy option for President Kennedy as he worked his way through the Cuban Missile Crisis. And lest we forget, President Clinton's

President Clinton's Pentagon was working up plans for a military strike against North Korea before talks led to an agreement that would supposedly put an end to that country's clandestine nuclear weapons program.

That going to war in Iraq has proved more difficult than anticipated does not change the underlying realities that gave rise to the Bush administration's decision to give preemption a more prominent status in U.S. statecraft. Do we think the potential consequences of terrorists getting their hands on weapons of mass destruction are any less significant? Are we any more confident that a state such as Iran would never conspire with terrorists to carry out an operation against our allies or us, the Great Satan, with such weapons? Do we really think that North Korea, which allows millions of its citizens to starve so it can avoid giving up its weapons programs, would be a responsible actor on the world stage once it matched up its weapons with ballistic missiles?

These questions are not going away, and thus preemption as an option will not go away either. This is a reality even the United Nations cannot ignore. To his credit, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan went so far as to suggest, in a speech after the Iraq war, that Security Council members begin discussing among themselves "the criteria for an early authorization of coercive measures to address certain types of threats." This is not a road he wants to go down. Nevertheless, as he said then, if the world is to have any "confidence" in the Security Council's policy decisions, it has to be able to say it can "deal effectively with the most difficult issues." Even now, while British, German and French diplomats are trying to handle Iran's illicit nuclear-weapons program, behind their effort stands the possible use of preemptive force by either the United States or Israel. Indeed, preemp-

tion is an essential, if unspoken, prerequisite for those talks' success. No one thinks Tehran would have begun negotiating seriously without that threat, and certainly few believe the talks would show greater progress if the prospect of military action were taken off the table.

As Robert Cooper, strategist and top advisor to the European Union's foreign affairs chief, has written: "It would be irresponsible to do nothing while even one further country acquires nuclear capability. Nor is it good enough to wait until that country acquires the bomb. By then the costs of military action may be too high." "In practice," he notes, "this is not so different from the long-standing British doctrine that no single power should be allowed to dominate the continent of Europe.... Nuclear weapons make every country potentially too strong to deal with."

Six years ago, Michael Walzer, the leading liberal "just war" theorist, wrote in defense of the Clinton administration's hard line toward Iraq that "in international law and morality, preventive

wars have generally been ruled out." And that the argument against such wars had been "first worked out when the aim of the standard preventive war was to avoid a shift in the balance of power." But that argument, he wrote, "looks different when the danger is posed by weapons of mass destruction, which are developed in secret, and which might be used suddenly, without warning, with catastrophic results." For that problem, "unilateral action is still a legitimate recourse while that work is going on, before it has produced a reliable result."

The point of quoting Walzer is not to play "gotcha" with critics of the Bush administration's decision to go to war against Iraq. Nor is it meant to convey the idea that military preemption is the only tool for addressing the problems we face. Rather, the point is that, well before Bush became president, preemption was a necessary policy option. And it will remain one long after he leaves the White House for a simple reason: The world is what it is, and no responsible chief executive can afford to think otherwise.