

PREVENT DEFENSE:

WHY THE BUSH DOCTRINE WILL HURT U.S. INTERESTS

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Overshadowed by the immediate confrontation with Iraq, but ultimately of greater import, are the consequences of the new U.S. national security strategy—the Bush Doctrine—a manifesto that does much more than simply provide the strategic and philosophical justification for a U.S. invasion of Iraq. This new approach to world politics, unveiled by the Bush administration as the summer of 2002 gave way to autumn, represents a fundamental shift from foundations upon which U.S. foreign policy has been based since World War II.

This strategy, the most dramatic statement of American international purpose since the adoption of NSC-68 in 1950 (which provided the foundation for the Cold-War containment of the Soviet Union)² will ultimately serve to make the United States less secure at home and undermine its political interests abroad. It is based on erroneous assumptions about the nature of international relations, and it fails to understand the crucial distinction between military might and achievement of political goals. As a result of the Bush doctrine, the United States will be less able to achieve its most highly valued strategic objectives in the short, medium and long run.

The National Security Strategy of the United States of America is a sweeping document of more than twelve thousand words,³ but its most important attributes can be summarized with just three: supremacy, ambition, and prevention. The first, supremacy, begins with a celebration of American might—“the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength”—and continues with an explicit commitment to maintain such military dominance as necessary, not simply to assure U.S. security or specific strategic objectives, but rather to guarantee sus-

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² “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security” (NSC-68, 14 April 1950), reprinted in Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

³ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, the White House, Washington, D.C., September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>. A non-PDF version (with different pagination) is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

tained primacy—dominance so great as to “dissuade future military competition.” The second, ambition, is the aggressive promotion of American values—quite broadly defined—as part of U.S. foreign policy. Under the Bush doctrine, for example, the United States now includes as part of its national security strategy the promotion of “pro-growth legal and regulatory policies” and “lower marginal tax rates” throughout the world. The third, prevention, is the most immediately consequential element of the new strategy: the articulation of a doctrine of preventive war. This should not be confused with preemption—striking first at an adversary that is about to attack—rather, the doctrine is one of prevention: “America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.” As the document makes clear, the United States now claims the right to attack those states that it deems may threaten it at some time in the future.

The Bush Doctrine of supremacy, ambition and prevention will backfire, and leave the United States weaker and less secure. It will quickly sabotage the war on terrorism. It will soon make the world more dangerous and less stable. And over time, it will transform world politics in a way that diminishes U.S. power and influence.

Undermining the Terror War

The immediate effect of the new Bush doctrine will be to undermine the single most important item on America’s foreign policy agenda, prosecuting the terror war. To this point, since the attacks of September 11, the Bush administration in its conduct of foreign policy has done the things it needed to do. It fought the war in Afghanistan, embarked upon a global pursuit of the al-Qaeda network, and, crucially, from the President’s first public address after the events of September 11, made it clear that the United States recognizes no distinction between anti-U.S. terrorist organizations and those states that knowingly harbor and aid them.

But despite these early accomplishments, much remains to be done in the terror war, and extinguishing the threat of al-Qaeda-sponsored terrorism remains the most important national security objective of the United States. Reducing al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and removing their Taliban benefactors from power was an important achievement and a necessary first step, but al-Qaeda remains a threat, especially as much of the enemy’s leadership escaped the U.S. attack. Moreover, both Afghanistan and Pakistan still walk a tightrope between order and anarchy, and the U.S. role on the ground in Afghanistan is far from over if the immediate military victory is to have any significant (positive) long-term political effect. Further, the pursuit of al-Qaeda cells

beyond Afghanistan, an ambitious effort which is only just getting underway, will present challenges that are less militarily tractable and more politically ambiguous, especially if the United States is drawn into local disputes only tangentially related to global terrorism.

Given these hard realities, pouring resources into new wars not directly linked to the terror war will come at a high opportunity cost—diverting limited war fighting resources—and will also carry with it great political costs. Not only will the inescapable collateral damage and political disorder fostered by U.S. attacks provide fertile breeding ground for anti-U.S. terrorist organizations, such preventive wars will undermine political support for the United States throughout the globe. This will contrast sharply and consequentially with the broad support (or at least the tacit understanding and approval) that the United States has enjoyed from the international community in the early stages of the terror war. The wellspring of this support flows from the widespread acknowledgment of the U.S. claim that there is no practical difference between al-Qaeda and states that knowingly support it. This crucial political understanding affords the United States enormous latitude in the conduct of its foreign policy and military strategy. But overstepping these generous boundaries and launching an attack on a country solely on the basis that the target has been defined by the United States as a potential threat, without evidence of a link between that state and al-Qaeda (or some other terrorist organization known to be plotting to attack the United States), will undercut the basis upon which the United States has conducted the terror war and undermine needed international support for that effort.

This is not to say that the United States should conduct its grand strategy in search of the applause of foreign governments. However, it must be recognized that by conflating new preventive wars with the terror war, the United States will not only confuse its (vital) purpose but also likely forfeit much of the international support that it has received since September 11. And despite America's military preponderance, to be successful the U.S. war on terror will depend on broad international support—the sharing of intelligence, support of local host governments, and, necessarily, coordination of efforts to trace flows of information and of illicit financial networks. In the absence of sincere and enthusiastic international cooperation, the United States will find itself at great disadvantage as terror cells become ever more shadowy and elusive. Again, this matters because it is the surviving—and apparently significant—remnants of al-Qaeda that represent a highly motivated, extremely dangerous, clear and imminent threat to the security of the United States at home and abroad.

The global repugnance toward preventive war (as opposed to military strikes directly linked to al-Qaeda) should not be underestimated—indeed, it has been readily understood by U.S. policymakers in the past. NSC-68, for example, the *Magna Carta* of anti-communist containment, was criticized by some detractors as the template for a dangerous crusade that oversold the Soviet threat and in so doing exacerbated the Cold War. And indeed, the language of the document is rather absolutist. The Soviet Union, NSC-68 explained, “is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.” The Cold War confrontation with the USSR, it continued, must be understood as “a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake.”⁴

Yet the framers of NSC-68 rejected the idea of preventive war—and not on its practicality, but on its politics. They understood that “It goes without saying that the idea of “preventive” war . . . is generally unacceptable to Americans.” This point is then underscored to account for the possible counterargument that the unprecedented dangers of the Cold War might present a special exception to this general rule: “despite the provocativeness of recent Soviet behavior,” such an attack, “would be repugnant to many Americans.” Displaying a political savvy and far-sightedness that is absent from the Bush doctrine, NSC-68 further acknowledged that if U.S. citizens were somehow able shake off these moral qualms and come to terms with the need for preventive war, even the successful use of overwhelming force would be unlikely to achieve U.S. political objectives. “It would . . . be difficult after such a war to create a satisfactory international order among nations. Victory in such a war would have brought us little if at all closer to victory in the fundamental ideological conflict.”⁵ These political realities were at one time well understood, and subsequently formed the basis, for example, of Robert Kennedy’s opposition to an attack on Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis (this, it should be noted, was a relatively “easy case” to make for preventive war). Kennedy insisted that “America’s traditions and history would not permit such a course of action,” and observed further that such an attack would “erode if not destroy the moral position of the United States throughout the world.”⁶

⁴ NSC-68, 14 April 1950, pp. 385, 442.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 431-32.

⁶ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 16, 27.

The bottom line is that preventive war is (and has been) properly understood to be fundamentally different from other aspects of the use of force. The practice of preventive war under any circumstances is likely to be foolhardy, and due to its very nature almost certainly unlikely to advance the foreign policy goals of a democratic state. Worse still, embarking on such an adventure at this moment, with the unfinished business of the terror war at hand, will not only divert needed resources and attention from the greater threat, and it will subvert the international support needed to succeed in that fight.

A More Dangerous, Less Stable World

Further down the road—beyond complicating and undermining the war on terror—the preventive war doctrine will also elicit specific policy responses from other states that will make the world a more dangerous place and undermine U.S. interests. Especially if the prescriptions of Bush doctrine are followed and the United States embarks upon a preventive war (or preventive wars), the results will be the accelerated global proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, greater regional instability and war, and increasing frustration at the failure of force to achieve stated political objectives.

Paradoxically, although one of the great concerns motivating the new security strategy is the possibility that weapons of mass destruction will fall into the wrong hands, the Bush doctrine actually creates strong incentives for more states to seek nuclear weapons. Any country that has reason to believe it is high on the U.S. “hit list” will certainly scramble to get its hands on whatever weapons it can. While certainly dangerous, this is to some extent little more than the acceleration of an existing problem, and arguably one that may have emerged in the absence of a change in U.S. policy. What’s new, however, and somewhat more subtle, is the likelihood that many governments, even those not currently at odds with the United States, will need to consider the possibility that they might run afoul of U.S. interests in the future. Some of these states might easily conclude that a small nuclear stockpile would be the only way to deter a preventive U.S. strike. And each state’s decision to go nuclear will set off new debates on the same issue within its neighbors. This will have a cascading effect, since there are a large number of states in the system that could plausibly go nuclear in relatively short order, but have made the political calculation that they are better off without such weapons. The Bush doctrine thus is likely to set in motion what future historians will dub the “scramble for nukes” by states previously disin-

clined to acquire such weapons, and the result will be a proliferation nightmare, made even worse by the fact that some of those new nuclear powers will have alarmingly lax command and control institutions. The effect of U.S. policy in the end will be to greatly *increase* the possibility that such weapons will fall into the wrong hands, and to make it more likely that militarized disputes in the future will involve states that have some nuclear capability.

Non-nuclear conflicts will also be exacerbated by the Bush doctrine. It would be naïve to assume that other states will not seize upon the U.S. embrace of a preventive war doctrine to argue that they, too, can add preventive war to the list of legitimate means by which just ends can be achieved. Indeed, there are many regions of the world where potential combatants—in some cases on both sides of a given conflict—can stake an even more plausible claim than can the United States for the need to strike preventively against their adversaries. (Not to mention new windows of opportunity that may be perceived by states during the scramble for nukes.) Throughout the Middle East, on the Indian Subcontinent, across the Taiwan straits, among the constituent republics of the former Soviet Union, and on the Korean peninsula, the counsel for preventive war is no doubt heard at the highest levels of authority. One factor that restrained such aggression in the past was its perceived illegitimacy. Scholars continue to debate the extent to which international norms and concerns for legitimacy circumscribe states' behavior. But few doubt that such factors matter to some extent. By shifting the moral authority of the United States in favor of preventive war, with one stroke the President has made war in each of these areas more likely now than it had been previously.

Finally, this change in strategy—which lowers the bar regarding the use of force—will weaken the crucial link between force and politics. This argument is too easily misunderstood—it is not to deny that war will remain a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy. There are times, such as in Afghanistan, when there is no alternative to the use of force. But even there winning the military battle did not guarantee achieving political objectives. Where the case for war is less clear-cut—as it will necessarily be in a preventive war—the likelihood is even greater that there will be an enormous chasm between military victory and political success.

It is easier for a great power to start an asymmetric war than to finish it—the early fighting typically favors the powerful, and this bright prospect looms larger for decision-makers facing tough choices than do distant clouds on the horizon. But wars are fought for a reason, and after the first battles are won the question remains open as to whether the victors will have the

skill and wherewithal to reconstitute the polity of the vanquished. If the answer to this question is no, or if the conduct of the war creates new adversaries, effectively relocating the problem rather than eliminating it, then such military victories will be pyrrhic at best.

Losing sight of the fact that force only “works” to the extent that it advances political goals is perhaps the most common (and costly) blunder in the history of international politics. A preventive war doctrine—shooting first and asking questions later—is an invitation to this type of political disaster.

U.S. Power and Political Balancing

Most broadly, and in the long run, the new Bush doctrine is misguided because it rests on faulty assumptions about the way that the world works. It suggests that the assertion of vast powers—“the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength”—will leave enemies and potential adversaries awestruck while providing friends and fence-sitters the confidence to fall in step with the U.S. line. This is not, however, the way the world works. Most states, and especially politically influential states, strongly prefer not to be pushed around by any power, regardless of how benevolent its motives may be. The U.S. Cold-War policy of containment, at its geopolitical core, was little more than an application of the classical vision that no single state—friend or foe—should come to dominate the world’s industrial centers. Similarly, for centuries the cornerstone of British foreign policy was to assure that no single power—any power—would come to dominate the European continent. Churchill approvingly described it this way: “For four hundred years the foreign policy of England has been to oppose the strongest, most aggressive, most dominating power on the continent.” Churchill explained further that it is the concentration of power in and of itself that states must redress in an uncertain world. “The policy of England takes no account of which nation it is that seeks the overlordship of Europe. It is concerned solely with whoever is the strongest or the potentially dominating tyrant.”⁷

Balancing against political dominance is the innate instinct most common among sovereign states and has been a ubiquitous feature of international political history. As Henry Kis-

⁷ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 1: *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), pp. 207-08.

singer recently reiterated, “When any state threatened to become dominant, its neighbors formed a coalition—not in pursuit of a theory of international relations but out of pure self-interest to block the ambitions of the most powerful.”⁸

Most states simply prefer to dwell in a world where there is some check on the ambitions of the great powers. Many countries, therefore, even those not easily identified as “evil,” might still be wary of a super-state whose express goals are to maintain unchallenged military supremacy, which plans to attack those it labels as potential threats, and whose reach is so ambitious that it includes as part of its national security strategy the promotion of convergence towards its own economic model, down to the intricacies of tax and regulatory policies.

The reaction to this kind of naked arrogance and ambition is likely to be, as it always has been, balancing. In the current context, this will not take the form of military balancing; the greatest dangers here are not that new foes will emerge, or that allies will become enemies. Rather, U.S. interests will be undermined by *political balancing*: the search, by other states, for greater political space between themselves and the United States. Thus, while the European Union is extremely unlikely to arm itself in anticipation of a militarized confrontation with the United States, it will increasingly question whether Europe and America share a similar vision of world politics, and contemplate openly whether European interests are best served by a marginal increase, as opposed to a marginal reduction, in U.S. global influence. Similar discussions will also emerge, more or less cautiously, among other friends of the United States such as Japan. Among existing adversaries the debates will be briefer as voices for moderation, engagement and accommodation will be trumped by those with a more confrontational, anti-American perspective, who will simply argue that *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* confirms their long held perspective on the true nature of American intentions.

But What About Iraq?

The Bush Doctrine was not written in a vacuum. To the contrary, it was formulated in a specific international political context, with one eye (at least) towards a military confrontation between the United States and Iraq. This matters (if paradoxically) because the consequences of such a war would depend fundamentally on the political context in which it was fought. There

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 70.

are two stylized possibilities for such a conflict: The first is a Bush Doctrine war—that is, a war justified on the grounds of prevention, without some form of approval (or at least acquiescence) by the Security Council of the United Nations, and over the opposition of regional players such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The second is a U.S.-led, UN-sanctioned war—justified on the grounds of enforcing UN resolutions, with the active support of important regional powers.

The military outcome will be the same in any event: the United States will win the war. But the prospects for political success—the reason for fighting in the first place—will depend squarely on which of the two scenarios above comes closer to describing the events that unfold. A Bush Doctrine war would be a disaster, for all of the reasons discussed above about the problems inherent in the strategy. It is virtually impossible to imagine that such a war would, in the long run, advance rather than undermine U.S. political objectives. Broadly speaking, the United States appears to be motivated by two objectives: a desire to prevent a bad and dangerous regime from acquiring weapons of mass destruction; and a desire to prevent the vast oil reserves of the mid-east region from falling under the political dominance of a regime implacably opposed to U.S. interests.

It is not obvious that any war—even a war fought under the best of circumstances—would achieve those goals. Again, the problem would not rest with the war itself, but with the political consequences of the fight. It is hard to say how difficult the military battle will be, since much would depend on the extent to which the Iraqi military put up a fierce resistance. But it would be a mistake to assume that the war will be a cakewalk, and a bloody conquest of Iraq is likely to heighten anti-Americanism in the region. And after victory, the challenges would only get harder—there will likely be sharp political disagreements about (and practical limitations to) how the victors will supervise Iraq's political reconstitution. Taking these concerns together, and adding in the unpredictability of war, illustrates the gap between the use of force and achieving political goals. If a “successful” war leads to chaos in Iraq, or contributes to the destabilization of (nuclear armed) Pakistan, or results in a sharp deterioration in U.S.-Saudi relations—then the war would help bring about the very world it was designed to prevent.

Still, there is a case for war. Disarming Iraq and removing the current regime would certainly be a good thing, most obviously by ending the rule of a horribly brutal dictator. And there are risks of inaction: given Hussein's pattern of behavior as a ruthless and unrestrained serial aggressor, and given his apparent willingness to take risks, the prospect that he might acquire

nuclear weapons is not a pleasant one. Thus, while a UN war would still be rife with political danger, it would at least stand a chance of achieving U.S. political objectives.

In short, doctrine matters. The merits of war against Iraq are debatable—my own assessment is that the political costs of (the best possible) war are very likely to outweigh the political benefits. But of much greater import than *whether* the war is fought is *how* the war is fought. A Bush Doctrine war would be an unmitigated disaster, because it would almost certainly be self-defeating. The United States would win the military fight in Iraq, but cultivate the problems that the resort to force was designed to suppress.

In the context of the Iraq war, the Bush Doctrine will likely create a more dangerous, less stable Middle East, and one more hostile towards the United States. More broadly and from all quarters, political balancing—from the cautious distancing of friends to the increasingly intractable opposition of foes—will, over the long run, be the legacy of the new National Security Strategy. In sum, rather than advance U.S. interests, American claims to permanent supremacy, by engendering political balancing, will create a world of states pre-disposed to resist U.S. policy objectives.