

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 35
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2005*

Article 10

5-1-2005

Preemption and the Evolution of America's Strategic Defense

Harry S. Laver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Harry S. Laver, "Preemption and the Evolution of America's Strategic Defense," *Parameters* 35, no. 2 (2005), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2257.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

Preemption and the Evolution of America's Strategic Defense

HARRY S. LAVER

© 2005 Harry S. Laver

“Since World War II, the United States has faced the difficult task of finding policies which would be adequate for security and peace and at the same time compatible with its traditions. Never before has a great nation been called upon to adjust its thinking and its action so radically in so short a period.”

— John Foster Dulles, April 1954¹

“For much of the last century, America's defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply, but new threats also require new thinking.”

— George W. Bush, June 2002²

In September 2001, government officials, members of the military, and citizens across the United States drew parallels between the terrorist attacks on the American homeland and the December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. Significant casualties, an attack against American sovereignty, and complete surprise were obvious similarities. Beyond these points, however, the dissimilarities of the two events made such comparisons of little use as the country struggled to understand how the world had changed and how the United States should deal with a new threat from an uncertain enemy.

A more appropriate and useful point of comparison, especially from a strategic planning perspective, is 6 August 1945, when the detonation of an atomic bomb signaled a sea change in warfare. The most apparent change came at the tactical level, where the destructive power and radioactivity of an atomic weapon created a battlefield environment that initially defied comprehension. Of greater significance, however, were the long-term strategic implications. In an instant, a paradigm shift occurred that led to a revolution in strategic affairs, evidenced by a succession of Presidents who worked to de-

velop a strategy that defined the most effective balance of conventional and nuclear forces. The tactical and operational doctrines, force structure, and resource allocation established through two world wars had to be reassessed in light of both the country's own nuclear capabilities and the potential of a nuclear enemy. This paradigm shift defined the parameters for a decades-long ideological, and at times military, struggle with the Soviet Union.

On 11 September 2001, another paradigm shift occurred. Terrorism was added to the post-1945 conventional and nuclear strategic equation as an equally significant third factor. The Bush Administration faced a challenge similar to that which strategic planners had encountered at the opening of the nuclear age, to create an effective and rational defense policy in a world that had been radically altered, one by atomic weapons, the other by terrorism. The President's 2002 *National Security Strategy*, based on the concept of preemption and commonly known as the Bush Doctrine, is the initial defense policy designed to address this three-part strategic configuration. First, this article places that strategy in a historical context to suggest that 11 September did indeed initiate a paradigm shift in strategic planning as significant as that of 1945, one that has yet to be fully acknowledged. Examining preemption with an eye to history makes evident the daunting challenges of crafting an acceptable and effective strategy to counter the danger of global terrorism. Second, this article reviews some of the preliminary analyses of preemption to encourage a debate on its propriety for the new strategic environment. The purpose of this article is not to advocate for or against the Bush Doctrine, but to call for an informed discussion. The war against al Qaeda and other terrorists, similar to the Cold War, likely will continue for years if not decades. It therefore remains incumbent on the American people and their political leaders to better understand preemption and engage in an objective national discussion on its practical and moral aspects, and the likely consequences of preventive action against Iran, North Korea, or other unforeseen threats.

Strategic Evolution

The strike against Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 signaled the beginning of the atomic age and a revolution in strategic affairs. Postwar officials faced unprecedented challenges in defining a defense program as strategic

Harry S. Laver holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Kentucky. He taught military history at the US Military Academy at West Point prior to becoming the military historian at Southeastern Louisiana University. He is the author of *Citizens More Than Soldiers: The Kentucky Militia and Society in the Early Republic* (forthcoming, University of Nebraska Press).

planning reached a level of complexity previously unimaginable. World War II's three-part strategic structure of land, sea, and air forces became an anachronism of a simpler age as strategy paradoxically became two-dimensional instead of three-dimensional: air, land, and sea forces coalesced under the rubric of "conventional," while atomic weapons and their more powerful successors formed the new category of nuclear forces. At the most basic conceptual level, strategists had only to determine the appropriate balance between conventional and nuclear.

This simplification, however, was deceptive, made evident by a range of issues: defining doctrines for the strategic and possible tactical use of nuclear weapons—either independently or in combined-arms operations; developing the technology and hardware to implement those doctrines; allocating resources between not only conventional and nuclear forces, but among nuclear weapons and each of the conventional services; and evaluating the social, political, and economic consequences of any nuclear strategy. For over 50 years, these issues and others challenged American civil and military leaders who labored to create an effective strategy and force structure to ensure long-term national security. Successive presidential administrations, technological advances in weaponry, and budgetary concerns all forced a continual reassessment of, and consequent evolution in, strategic doctrine.

In 1950, the Truman Administration defined the first American nuclear strategy in National Security Council memo 68 (NSC-68), which established containment as the foundation of national defense. Later administrations modified the policy's implementation, but its essential premise, stopping the spread of communism through a combination of conventional and nuclear forces, remained unchanged. Truman relied on a fully developed nuclear arsenal to deter Soviet expansionism and a reinvigorated conventional force to ensure other US foreign policy initiatives. In 1953, recognizing that an equal commitment to both conventional and nuclear forces was fiscally unsustainable, Dwight Eisenhower subordinated conventional weapons to nuclear. Deterrence became the watchword of his "New Look" policy. Almost immediately, however, critics recognized the strategy's weaknesses. Henry Kissinger, then a political science professor at Harvard, identified the strategic box created by the New Look. He argued that because the United States possessed insufficient conventional forces to counter local communist expansion, the strategy limited military and political leaders to either nuclear holocaust or inaction, regardless of the level of Soviet aggression or the moral implications of total war. Kissinger challenged defense policymakers to develop a more nuanced and responsive doctrine: "Given the power of modern weapons, it should be the task of our strategic doctrine to create alternatives less cataclysmic than a thermonuclear holocaust."³

“Will preemption provide an overarching framework for fighting a decades-long conflict as containment did during the Cold War?”

In 1961, John F. Kennedy offered such an alternative, declaring, “Our defense posture must be both flexible and determined. Any potential aggressor contemplating an attack on any part of the Free World . . . must know that our response will be suitable, selective, swift, and effective.” Designed to avoid massive retaliation’s strategic cul-de-sac, Kennedy rejected its nuclear dominance in favor of greater symmetry and operational flexibility.⁴

When Lyndon Johnson became President in November 1963, flexible response was undergoing a trial by fire in Southeast Asia. Over the course of the Johnson presidency, the frustrations of Vietnam demonstrated the challenges of fighting a conventional, limited war against an unconventional enemy. Richard Nixon, elected in part because of the country’s dissatisfaction with Vietnam, collaborated with Henry Kissinger to craft a substantial shift in America’s defense policy. *Détente*, as the Nixon/Kissinger strategy became known, was a further revision of containment, one that emphasized diplomacy to convince the Soviets to accept the legitimacy of other ideologies and the mutual benefits of a stable world order. That dialogue continued under Jimmy Carter, who sought to define “a new American foreign policy—a policy based on constant decency in its values.” Carter hoped to maintain this moral commitment through nonintervention and a contraction of military power: “We desire a freeze,” he announced in 1977, “on further modernization and production of weapons and a continuing, substantial reduction of strategic nuclear weapons as well.”⁵

Ronald Reagan, leading the Republican resurgence of the 1980s, reversed the perceived strategic anemia of the Carter Administration. He won congressional support for six years of defense budget increases focused on modernization, training, pay raises, and, most ambitiously, a missile defense shield program, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Years of containment, capped by the Reagan military renaissance, bore fruit when the Soviet Union surrendered its ideological legitimacy and national identity in 1991, ending nearly five decades of US-Soviet confrontation.⁶

While many historians credit Reagan's policies with accelerating if not causing the end of the Cold War, his national defense strategy, like each of his predecessors', defined what he saw as the proper balance for the two-dimensional framework of conventional and nuclear weapons that had existed since 6 August 1945. This conventional/nuclear duality outlived the Soviet Union, as Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton operated within its bounds. For over 50 years, presidential inclinations, technological innovations, Soviet ambitions, and shifting social and political pressures all drove the evolution of containment in a search for the most appropriate strategy. The complexities of strategic planning in the late 20th century were daunting; however, the initial moments of the 21st century presented even greater challenges.

A More Complex World

The events of 11 September 2001 initiated a strategic paradigm shift as momentous as that of 1945. Foreign terrorist attacks were no longer a distant evil visited upon faraway regions like Chechnya or the Middle East; they had come to America with stark brutality. Like 6 August 1945, the day's events instantly made existing defense policy obsolete. The two-dimensional, nation-state oriented, conventional/nuclear strategic framework now added a third element, terrorism. Balancing nuclear and conventional forces had challenged Presidents for decades, but now the Bush Administration faced the task of defining a defense policy for a three-point strategic constellation. Conventional arms continued to consume the majority of defense resources in places like the Balkans, Haiti, and South Korea, and in maintaining readiness to counter potential aggressors like North Korea, Iran, or, at the time, Iraq. The nuclear threat, although diminished after the Cold War, persisted in China, Russia, former Soviet republics, and most alarmingly in a provocative Iran and an inscrutable North Korea. Terrorism was the added dimension in the equation, a new class of warfare at the strategic level that did not fit into the nuclear/conventional paradigm and one that US strategy and force structure were ill-equipped to meet. As a tactic, terrorism has plagued civilizations for centuries, but 11 September demonstrated that extremists were prepared to use it on a previously unimaginable strategic scale. Countering this terrorist threat would require new ways of thinking, innovative technologies, a greater use of covert operations and special forces, and an additional commitment of resources, all while maintaining conventional and nuclear capabilities. Now the task was to define a strategic doctrine that included not two, but three types of warfare.

President Bush introduced his strategy to confront these multiple threats at West Point in June 2002. Acknowledging that a Cold War mentality was no longer tenable, he told cadets that in the past, "America's defense re-

lied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply, but new threats also require new thinking.” To fight this new type of war against terrorists at home and abroad, the President defined a strategy of preemption, now known as the Bush Doctrine: “If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. . . . Our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action.” The specifics of preemption, outlined in the *National Security Strategy* (NSS), declare that the United States “will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country.” Emphasizing that international law has always recognized the right of a nation to act in the face of “an imminent danger of attack,” the NSS proposes that the revolutionary nature of a terrorist enemy required a reassessment of “imminent”: “We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objective of today’s adversaries. . . . The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack. . . . [T]he United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.” Before such an enemy could pose an immediate threat, the United States would now strike first against terrorists “and those who knowingly harbor or provide aid to them.”⁷

Preemption and Prevention in the Past

Although little remembered, defense analysts debated the propriety of preemption in the 1950s, and given that the strategy is at the heart of the Bush Doctrine, their thoughts are worth revisiting. First, however, a word of caution on definitions. In the 1950s, the term “preemptive war” defined a military action taken only after an *imminent* threat had been identified. Our concern, however, and the foundation of the Bush Doctrine, lies with what at the time was termed “preventive war,” defined in the late 1950s by strategic theorist Bernard Brodie as “a premeditated attack by one country against another, which is unprovoked in the sense that it does not wait upon a specific aggression or other overt action by the target state.” In the late 1940s, defense circles first considered the option of preventive war, but the policy found little support. Writing in 1949, George Kennan made the observation that

a democratic society cannot plan a preventive war. . . . But even if it were possible for democracy to lay its course deliberately toward war, I would question whether that would be the right answer. . . . [W]e are condemned, I think, to define our objectives here in terms of what can be accomplished by measures short of war. And, while this is a matter of personal philosophy rather than of

objective observation, I for one am deeply thankful that Providence has placed that particular limitation on us.⁸

The Truman Administration came to the same conclusion, stating in NSC-68 that the United States would not make a first strike “unless it is demonstrably in the nature of a counter-attack to a blow which is on its way or about to be delivered.” In other words, there would be no preventive war; pre-emption, on the other hand, remained an acceptable option: “The military advantages of landing the first blow become increasingly important with modern weapons, and this is a fact which requires us to be on the alert in order to strike with our full weight as soon as we are attacked, and, if possible, before the Soviet blow is actually delivered.”⁹

The challenges of a deepening Cold War pushed President Eisenhower to contemplate preventive action. Concerned about the Soviets’ thermonuclear capabilities and the rising cost of defense budgets, Eisenhower wrote to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that given the circumstances, the Administration might “be forced to consider whether or not our duty to future generations did not require us to *initiate* war at the most propitious moment that we could designate.” Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, however, rejected preventive war as “contrary to every principle upon which our nation had been founded, . . . abhorrent to the great mass of American people.” Just a few months later, the President also disallowed, at least publicly, such a strategy: “A preventive war, to my mind, is an impossibility today. . . . [F]rankly, I wouldn’t even listen to anyone seriously that came in and talked about such a thing.”¹⁰

In *Strategy in the Missile Age* (1959), Bernard Brodie summarized the debate over preventive war and found three points framing the deliberations that may be as applicable today as then. First, there was a recognition that the country’s offensive military capabilities no longer provided an effective defense. Neither conventional nor nuclear weapons could completely stop a catastrophic attack. Second, most acknowledged that the damage and casualties from such an attack would be intolerable. Finally, there was no indication that any foreseeable technological advance would improve the situation. These conditions created an environment that made preventive war appealing to some. Proponents of such a course, working from the assumptions that war was inevitable and that intelligence could identify appropriate targets, argued that executing a preventive war offered significant advantages; it would produce decisive results and decrease if not eliminate the effects of an enemy response. Conversely, opponents warned that preventive war would initiate war on the basis of what *might* happen, a path Bismarck had counseled against: “I would . . . never advise your Majesty to declare war

forthwith, simply because it appeared that our opponent would begin hostilities in the near future. One can never anticipate the way of divine providence securely enough for that.” While moral concerns were probably not the motivation behind Bismarck’s advice, they were of great concern to the opponents of preventive war who argued that this path crossed the accepted moral prohibition on the use of lethal force based on assumptions. Brodie commented, “The people of the United States have obviously made a decision, with little overt debate but quite remarkable unanimity, against any form of preventive war. The lack of active consideration of the matter confirms only the preordained nature of the decision, which accords profoundly with our national psychology and system of values.”¹¹ In the 1950s, neither the Eisenhower Administration nor the American people were prepared to cross that moral boundary. Henry Kissinger perhaps expressed the national sentiment on preventive war when he wrote, “There has always been an air of unreality about a program so contrary to the sense of the country and the constitutional limits within which American foreign policy must be conducted.”¹²

In the 1940s, President Truman rejected the call of a minority to take preventive action against Soviet nuclear targets, opting instead for a strategy of containment, a decision confirmed by each of his successors. Had Truman or the Presidents who followed chosen the path of preventive strikes, a catastrophic nuclear war would now be part of our history, perhaps including either a minimal yet horrific Soviet retaliatory attack or worse. Instead, containment initiated a decades-long Cold War of high tensions, frustrating alliances, and regional conflicts. In the end, however, Truman’s strategy, coupled with presidential prudence, successfully met the era’s two greatest challenges—maintaining the security of the United States and preventing nuclear war.

Preemption in the Present

A national consensus that rejected preventive war in the 1950s developed, as Brodie noted, with little debate. In a striking reversal, in 2002 the United States accepted, again with little deliberation, a national strategy of preemption (preventive war in 1950s terminology) as defined in the Bush Doctrine. Since the issuance of the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, the war in Iraq and the politics of a presidential election have absorbed Americans’ attention, forestalling a debate on the propriety and likely effectiveness of the nation’s first post-9/11 strategic doctrine. Defense strategists and theorists, however, have begun the process of evaluating the merits and deficiencies of preemption for fighting a war against terrorists. Questions of terminology, international law, counterproliferation, multilateralism, military effectiveness, and ethical skepticism frame the developing dialogue.

The distinction made in the 1950s between preemption and preventive war has been lost in today's debate, and the incorrect use of the term preemption when preventive war would be more accurate has significant consequences. Francois Heisbourg, chairman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, points out that current international law makes the distinction, and a lack of precision can create confusion between friend and foe alike. Potential allies may perceive such imprecision as an American inability to recognize the subtleties and nuances of diplomacy, resulting in decreased international confidence and hindering the prospect of a united front against terrorism. Indiscriminately swapping terms can also mislead potential enemies, convincing them to accelerate development of deterrent capabilities, namely weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to counter a perceived threat from the United States when none may in fact exist. Heisbourg concludes that preventive war is a potentially sustainable doctrine if the United States works closely with allies to clarify and precisely define the specific guidelines of preventive action, especially what constitutes an "imminent" threat.¹³

The issue of imminence is also central to the question of preemption's (or, really, prevention's) legality. In respect to international law, preemption in the sense of preventive war may well be legal, according to law professor Anthony Clark Arend. By tradition, international law recognizes the right of a nation to act preemptively in self-defense provided that it (1) demonstrates necessity, that is, shows that another nation poses an imminent threat, and (2) that the action taken is in proportion to the threat, avoiding excessive force. Today's preemption, as outlined by the Bush Doctrine, argues that the post-9/11 world requires a reassessment of "imminent," that the proliferation of WMD and their potential nexus with terrorists has made obsolete the customary understanding of international law's necessity requirement, especially of what constitutes an imminent threat. To date, the Bush Administration has offered only an implicit reinterpretation of "imminent," while international law has shown no sign of change. Should international law come to accept the Bush Doctrine's implied definition of imminent, "preemption may, in fact," Arend concludes, "be lawful—even if politically unwise."¹⁴

How might a reconfigured meaning of imminent and preemption fit into international law? Neither international law nor the UN Charter addresses the current strategic environment where terrorists rather than nation-states threaten the lives of thousands of civilians, but strategist Terence Taylor proposes a set of three criteria to redefine what constitutes an imminent threat in the post-9/11 world. First, the gravity of the threat must be significant, such as that posed by WMD. Second, the method of delivery must be considered—not in relation to technology but in respect to the possibility of a specific warning. Terrorism's reliance on secrecy and surprise generally de-

nies any forewarning of an attack; thus, Taylor writes, “It can be argued that even a general threat could qualify as imminent in international law.” The final criterion is a declared intent by the potential attackers, such as al Qaeda’s pronouncements to make further and more devastating attacks against the United States. A threat that fits these criteria, Taylor suggests, “creates a pervasive sort of imminent threat that could demand anticipatory military action . . . at a point in time when the opportunity arises to eliminate the threat.” The validity of this standard in respect to international law is unclear, and will remain so until both American policymakers and their foreign counterparts establish clear and accepted definitions for terms like “imminent.” Resolution of this question “is as important to counter unjustified recourse to anticipatory military action as it is to provide protection to civilian populations against catastrophic attacks.”¹⁵

Leaving behind the definitions and semantics of international law raises the practical issue of applying a strategy of prevention in a world of WMD, terrorists, and the possible mixing of the two. Professor Jason Ellis, offering one perspective, maintains that preventive action should be part of a broader strategy of counterproliferation. Past efforts at nonproliferation of WMD, including ballistic missiles, he argues, have failed, and the Bush Administration has adopted a proactive response to the “proliferation-terrorism nexus.” By acting “offensively today to preclude the development and delivery of graver threats down the line,” the Administration has the best chance of stopping or mitigating the effects of the WMD proliferation that has already occurred. The challenge will be “translating this strategic guidance into credible operational capabilities and plans.”¹⁶

Strategic theorists Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter agree that the time has passed for emphasizing nonproliferation, indeed arguing that the President’s strategy of preemption “does not go far enough.” Based on the UN’s “Responsibility to Protect” principle that defines a world responsibility to protect people’s lives and human rights through direct intervention if necessary, the authors propose a parallel “collective ‘duty to prevent’” rogue nations from obtaining or using WMD. In the post-9/11 environment, nations must act proactively to confront the threat of WMD; however, Feinstein and Slaughter maintain that the majority of effort must come through collective nonmilitary actions such as economic and diplomatic initiatives, sanctions, and embargoes. When these measures are fully exhausted, military alternatives undertaken by “unilateral action or coalitions of the willing should be considered.” Similar to Ellis, they point out that the question of who decides when the time has come to exercise the military option remains unanswered.¹⁷

Offering a differing view, strategist Gu Guoliang argues that in practice, a strategy of prevention “won’t work.” To be successful, a strategy must

be based on reliable intelligence that identifies the enemy's specific intentions, capabilities, and location, and have legal standing and moral authority in the world community. Preventive warfare, he argues, fulfills none of these requirements and therefore will prove ineffective in stopping the use of WMD. Citing former Secretary of Defense William Cohen's warning that "American military superiority actually increases the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical attack against us by creating incentives for adversaries to challenge us asymmetrically," Guoliang writes that preemption (prevention), can do nothing to prevent attacks by terrorists using trucks, ships, or jumbo jets. Moreover, preventive action by the United States both sets a precedent for other states to claim the same right of prevention and contributes to America's unilateralist image. International cooperation, he suggests, is the key to international security. Multinational efforts to continue and strengthen nonproliferation programs will lessen the dangers posed by nation-states, while widespread cooperation among members of the world community can help reduce political, financial, and moral support for non-state threats.¹⁸

Lawrence Freedman, who for decades has studied and commented on international strategy, reaches a similar conclusion. According to Freedman, deterrence is an outdated strategy of the Cold War, and a strategy of prevention will prove ineffective against the asymmetrical threat of terrorism; in short, "neither can form the basis of a new strategy." The success of deterrence during the Cold War emanated from the balanced terror of Mutually Assured Destruction. Recognizing that each side marshaled sufficient firepower to annihilate the other dissuaded both from risking conflict, creating a stable if tense environment. Such a dynamic among forces today is unlikely, given the extremism and tactics of terrorists; there is little that can deter a suicide bomber. Nor does preemption present an effective defense framework, and here Freedman also distinguishes between preemption and prevention. Once more the question arises concerning the definition of imminent threat. Echoing others, Freedman maintains that in addition to concerns about legality, the practical implementation of anticipatory action is problematic. Identifying an imminent threat from a state is difficult; recognizing a similar threat from non-state groups like terrorists is essentially impossible. In very practical terms, preemption will not stop attacks like those of 11 September. Prevention, however, presents a possible alternative. Acknowledging that at times an imminent threat will likely require a preemptive military strike, Freedman argues that *nonmilitary* preventive actions, such as better intelligence, diplomatic initiatives, economic assistance, and improved technologies, can provide "sound guidance for dealing with the security problems within and arising from weak states." In other words, address the sources and motivations of terrorists, rather than the consequences of their actions. But

unlike a quick military fix, this approach requires a willingness “to engage difficult problems over an extended period of time.”¹⁹

One final viewpoint to consider is that offered by Colonel Franklin Wester, an Army Reserve chaplain. Using Just War tradition to evaluate the ethical legitimacy of the Bush Doctrine as applied in the Iraq War, Wester argues that “the case of Iraq fails crucial ethical tests.” The United States at best only marginally met the standard for legitimate authority to initiate an invasion, there existed no imminent threat to the United States or its allies, and the Administration chose war not as a last resort but out of frustration over Saddam’s intransigence. In addition to arguing that the Bush Doctrine’s application in Iraq did not meet Just War’s ethical standards, Wester goes on to suggest, more significantly, that the *National Security Strategy*’s emphasis on preemption may signal an ethical paradigm shift that redefines “imminent threat” as “a clear danger [that] is not necessarily a present danger.”²⁰

Preemption’s Future?

Rather than an emerging consensus, these arguments make evident that the path forward in strategic planning is not clearly marked. Indeed, preemption’s implementation since its adoption as the foundation of the *National Security Strategy* has raised more questions and concerns than answers and solutions. The Bush Administration and its national security staff must evaluate whether preemption in its present form is the most appropriate and effective defense policy for a war against terrorism.

Will preemption provide an overarching framework for fighting a decades-long conflict as containment did during the Cold War? If not, a new strategic doctrine, perhaps one that emphasizes nonmilitary and special forces operations, must be crafted to counter successfully the radical extremist threat. On the other hand, maintaining preemption raises its own challenges. Diplomatic initiatives will need to address the international community’s perception that the United States has adopted unilateralism in practice if not in policy. More specifically, the status of preemption in international law must be clarified, as well as the closely related issue of defining “imminent.” The United States needs to develop an accepted definition of what constitutes an imminent threat in the post-9/11 world, and this determination should be done in consultation with the nation’s allies. In regard to the practical application of preemption, military planners and strategists will need to generate tactical doctrines that can be applied both to nation-states who present traditional conventional and nuclear threats, and to non-state actors like al Qaeda who rarely present an identifiable target and who by the nature of their methods provide no prior warning. The President’s decision to execute any preemptive or preventive military operation will be based on his

national security team's recommendations and the intelligence assessments upon which they rely. As recent events demonstrate, reform is needed in both intelligence gathering and analysis.

In its position as the only superpower, the United States must lead the free world by developing a strategy—preemption or its successor—that, like containment, will gather the international support necessary to successfully fight a war against an amorphous and insidious enemy like al Qaeda. An understanding of strategic evolution since 6 August 1945 demonstrates the great challenges of crafting a successful defense policy, challenges that became even more complex after 11 September 2001. Preemption, the first attempt to define a security policy for this new strategic paradigm, will certainly undergo revision or replacement, not unlike the iterations of containment during the Cold War. This process, however, must begin with an evaluation of and debate over the policy itself. Defense strategists must learn from the history of preemption *and* prevention, and pursue a thoughtful re-consideration of America's strategic doctrine.

America will likely be unsuccessful in the war against terrorists through military superiority alone. A doctrine of preemption without a substantial nonmilitary component may well place the United States in a strategic box similar to that of Dulles's massive retaliation: undertake military operations on the scale of a national invasion or do nothing at all. In practice as much as in policy, America's defense doctrine must include, as the *National Security Strategy* outlines, more sophisticated and nuanced diplomatic initiatives and humanitarian programs, efforts designed, in former Secretary of State Colin Powell's words, "to reduce the underlying sources of terrorist motivation and recruitment." As the Army Chief of Staff, General Peter Schoomaker, recently observed, "This war that we're in is not going to be won militarily. . . . [It] really is a clash of ideas." The second Bush Administration should work aggressively and sincerely to win not only military engagements but that clash of ideas and values, to win the support of world leaders and the peoples they govern, and to win back the hearts and minds of those who on 11 September 2001 stood shoulder to shoulder with America.²¹

NOTES

1. John Foster Dulles, "Policy for Security and Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, 32 (April 1954), 353.

2. George W. Bush, "Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, NY," 1 June 2002, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd10jn02_txt-5.

3. Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 19. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 366, 380-81, 399-404, 414-15. Lawrence Freedman, "The First Two Generations of Nuclear Strategists," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 740-41. Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear*

Strategy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), pp. 69-77, 85-87. John Foster Dulles, "The Evolution of Foreign Policy," *Department of State Bulletin*, 25 January 1954, p. 108. Also see Dulles, "Policy for Security and Peace," pp. 353-64. In 1959, Bernard Brodie commented on Dulles's commitment to "massive retaliatory power": "henceforward primary reliance would be placed on that deterrent for coping with local aggression." Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959), p. 248.

4. John F. Kennedy, "Special Message on the Defense Budget," in *President Kennedy's Program: Texts of All the President's Messages to Congress* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1961), pp. 50-51. Also see John F. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 38. Weigley, *American Way of War*, pp. 442-45. Freedman, "The First Two Generations," pp. 757-58. Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 235, 246.

5. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 237, 274-344. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard M. Nixon, 1970* (Washington: GPO, 1971), pp. 118-19. Jimmy Carter, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame," 22 May 1977, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Jimmy Carter, 1977* (Washington: GPO, 1977), I, 957, 959. Weigley, *American Way of War*, pp. 467-68. Freedman, "The First Two Generations," pp. 762-78. Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p. 393.

6. Andrew E. Busch, "Ronald Reagan and the Defeat of the Soviet Empire," *Political Studies Quarterly*, 27 (No. 3, 1997), 451-66. Beth A. Fischer, "Toeing the Hardline? The Reagan Administration and the Ending of the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly*, 112 (No. 3, 1997), 477-96. Freedman, "The First Two Generations," pp. 761, 776-78. Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), pp. 614-28.

7. Bush, "Commencement Address at West Point." George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, September 2002), pp. 5, 6, 15.

8. Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, p. 227, n. 2. George F. Kennan, Lecture to Foreign Service Institute, 19 January 1949, quoted in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 49, note.

9. NSC-68, Section IX.C., <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/nsc-68/nsc68-3.htm>.

10. Memorandum, Eisenhower to Dulles, 8 September 1953, quoted in David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960," *International Security*, 7 (Spring 1983), 33. General Matthew Ridgway, Memorandum for the Record, 17 May 1954, quoted in Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 34. Eisenhower Press Conference, 11 August 1954, quoted in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 149, note. Stating a position in accord with Ridgway and Eisenhower was retired Navy Captain W. D. Puleston, who wrote in 1955, "In order to make atomic retaliation effective as a deterrent to aggression, we must decide now and prepare to strike first whenever we have positive evidence that an attack is being mounted against the United States. Such a policy does not contemplate preventive war or a sneak attack. We would only strike if the prospective enemy did not cease preparing to attack us or our allies by a certain time." Quoted in Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p. 127.

11. Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, p. 392. Bismarck quoted, p. 234. See also pp. 223-48, 392-409.

12. Henry A. Kissinger, "Military Policy and Defense of the 'Grey Areas,'" *Foreign Affairs*, 33 (April 1955), 416.

13. Francois Heisbourg, "A Work in Progress: The Bush Doctrine and Its Consequences," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26 (Spring 2003), 75-88.

14. Anthony Clark Arend, "International Law and the Preemptive Use of Military Force," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26 (Spring 2003), 89.

15. Terence Taylor, "The End of Imminence?" *The Washington Quarterly*, 27 (Autumn 2004), 66-67.

16. Jason D. Ellis, "The Best Defense: Counterproliferation and U.S. National Security," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26 (Spring 2003), 117, 128.

17. Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter, "A Duty to Prevent," *Foreign Affairs*, 83 (January/February 2004), 136, 137, 149.

18. Gu Guoliang, "Redefine Cooperative Security, Not Preemption," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26 (Spring 2003), 135, 137. See also Michael Hirsh, "Bush and the World," *Foreign Affairs*, 81 (September/October 2002), 18-43; G. John Ikenberry, "America's Imperial Ambition," *Foreign Affairs*, 81 (September/October 2002), 44-60; and Jeffrey Record, "The Bush Doctrine and War with Iraq," *Parameters*, 33 (Spring 2003), 4-21.

19. Lawrence Freedman, "Prevention, Not Preemption," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26 (Spring 2003), 105, 114. P. H. Liotta presents further discussion of the challenges presented by non-state actors in "Chaos as Strategy," *Parameters*, 32 (Summer 2002), 47-56.

20. Franklin Eric Wester, "Preemption and Just War: Considering the Case of Iraq," *Parameters*, 34 (Winter 2004), 20, 36.

21. Colin L. Powell, "A Strategy of Partnerships," *Foreign Affairs*, 83 (January/February 2004), 22. Schoemaker quoted in Robert Burns, Associated Press, "Army Chief Likens Terror Threat to Cancer," 15 June 2004.