

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Politics & Government	85	98 Religion & Philosophy
Foreign Policy & Defense	87	100 Science, Technology
Economics, Labor & Business	90	& Environment
Society	91	102 Arts & Letters
Press & Media	95	107 Other Nations

Debating Preemptive War

A Survey of Recent Articles

Seeking to justify its threatened war on Iraq, the Bush administration last summer boldly updated the idea of preemptive war and stamped it official doctrine. Was this a grand strategy for a new age of terrorism—or a global expression of the arrogance of power? Or was it, more prosaically, an unnecessary, potentially costly scholastic exercise?

“Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination. . . . America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed,” President George W. Bush declares in the introduction to the annual *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Sept. 17, 2002, at www.whitehouse.gov).

International law has long recognized the right to preempt an imminent attack, says the document, but “the concept of imminent threat” must be adapted to the new realities.

Criticism has come from both left and right. Writing in *The Nation* (Oct. 28, 2002), Bruce Cumings, a University of Chicago historian, claims that “some of [the document’s] logic would flunk even a freshman class: as in preemptive attacks are OK for us, but other nations ‘should [not] use preemption as a pretext for aggression.’” In *The American Conservative* (Nov. 4, 2002), Andrew J. Bacevich, director of the Center for International Relations at

Boston University, charges that the Bush strategy, crafted by “zealots” who appear to recognize no limits to American power, is a prescription for “the progressively greater militarization of U.S. foreign policy.”

In *Foreign Policy* (Nov.–Dec. 2002), however, John Lewis Gaddis, the noted Yale University historian of the Cold War, finds the Bush doctrine of preemption persuasive—and potentially one of the most significant statements of strategy in U.S. history. “Who would not have preempted Hitler or Milosevic or Mohammed Atta, if given the chance?”

Gaddis lauds the Bush document’s treatment of terrorists and tyrants as equal dangers requiring a new strategy. Suicide bombers, for example, do not respond to deterrence. While the document calls for U.S. military hegemony, it also emphasizes—to a degree few pundits have noted—the need for cooperation among the great powers. Bush reasons that they will find U.S. power acceptable if it fosters stability and addresses the root cause of terrorism—not poverty but the absence of freedom. Thus, the final goal of the Bush strategy is to spread democracy everywhere.

Iraq, says Gaddis, “is the most feasible place where we can strike the next blow” after the victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan, and given the difficulty of finishing off Al Qaeda. If Saddam Hussein can be toppled, Gaddis

thinks, “we can set in motion a process that could undermine and ultimately remove reactionary regimes elsewhere in the Middle East, thereby eliminating the principal breeding ground for terrorism.” If his reading of the Bush strategy is correct, he says, then the national security strategy report could be “the most important reformulation of U.S. grand strategy in over half a century.”

But Michael Walzer, a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, New Jersey, and author of the acclaimed *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977), argues that the Bush strategy is misconceived, beginning with the use of the word *preemption*. “In the absence of evidence suggesting not only the existence of Iraqi weapons but also their imminent use, preemption is not an accurate description of what the president is threatening,” he writes in *The New Republic* (Sept. 30, 2002). “No one expects an Iraqi attack tomorrow or next Tuesday, so there is nothing to preempt. The war that is being discussed is preventive, not preemptive.”

The traditional argument for preventive war is to avert a disruption of the existing balance of power by a rival state engaged in a military buildup, Walzer writes. “International lawyers and just-war theorists have never looked on this argument with favor because the danger to which it alludes is not only distant but speculative, whereas the costs of a preventive war are near, certain, and usually terrible.” In the modern era, in which weapons of mass destruction can be used without warning, the gap between preemptive and preventive war may be narrower, he acknowledges. Israel’s 1981 preventive attack on Iraq’s nuclear reactor, for instance, may also have been preemptive. But the Iraqi threat to the United States today, he says, is not as immediate as it was (and is) to Israel.

“People of goodwill may differ on how to apply just-war norms in particular cases, especially when events are moving rapidly and the facts are not altogether clear,” the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops notes (in a Nov. 13, 2002, statement at www.ncbuscc.org). But the bishops, too, question “recent proposals to expand dramatically traditional limits on just cause to include preventive uses of military force to overthrow threatening regimes or to deal with weapons of mass destruction.”

But deterrence, which worked against the

Soviet Union, won’t work against terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, asserts former Clinton administration official Philip Bobbitt, writing in *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Fall 2002). “Our fear is not that Saddam Hussein is going to attack New York or even attack Tel Aviv,” but rather that Iraq might slip nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons to terrorists.

Saddam’s past behavior, however, suggests that he is not undeterrable, contend three Brookings Institution scholars—Michael E. O’Hanlon, Susan E. Rice, and James B. Steinberg—in a working paper (Nov. 14, 2002) at www.brookings.edu. “In 1990, the United States was unclear about its commitment to Kuwait prior to Iraq’s decision to invade; since Desert Storm, the United States has been clear, and Saddam has not again attacked a U.S. ally in the region.” Saddam knows that there’s a high risk of getting caught, and thus attacked, if he supplies terrorists with weapons of mass destruction. It’s “highly unlikely” he would do so.

Nevertheless, if Saddam possessed nuclear arms, he “would become much more dangerous in the region,” and the threat of a U.S. response might not deter him. But preventing him from acquiring nuclear weapons, they argue, does not require an expanded concept of preemption. That change “reinforces the image of the United States as too quick to use military force and to do so outside the bounds of international law and legitimacy”—and may encourage the administration to resort to force too quickly. And even as the new posture makes it harder for the United States to win international backing for its own use of force, it may also reduce America’s future ability to persuade other nations (e.g., India and Pakistan) not to use force. They, too, will be able to invoke the new concept.

The Brookings authors contend that the new doctrine was never needed, since the 1991 United Nations Security Council resolutions obliging Saddam to disarm were available. However, Walzer notes, “there was no will to enforce the inspection system” when it broke down in the mid-1990s—“not at the UN . . . not in Europe, and not in the Clinton administration.” And without the Bush administration’s threats of war, he believes, there would have been no effort to restore the UN inspections.