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## *Nuclear Deterrence, Preventive War, and Counterproliferation*

by Jeffrey Record

### Executive Summary

During the Cold War, the principal function of nuclear weapons was to deter nuclear attack. Nuclear deterrence was not considered a tool of nonproliferation. The primary mechanisms for halting the proliferation of nuclear weapons were the nonproliferation regime established by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968 and the U.S. extension of nuclear deterrence to states that might otherwise have sought security through the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Since the end of the Cold War, and especially in the wake of the September 11, 2001, al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the United States, the U.S. government has reexamined the utility of both nuclear deterrence and nonproliferation. The discovery in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War that Iraq, an NPT signatory, had secretly embarked on a huge nuclear weapons program prompted the United States to embrace counterproliferation, which consists of a series of nonwar initiatives designed to prevent hostile states from acquiring nuclear weapons and, in the event of crisis or war, to destroy such weapons and their supporting infrastructure.

The 9/11 attacks a decade later spawned proc-

lamation of a new use-of-force doctrine calling for preventive military action against so-called “rogue states” seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. The doctrine reflected a loss of confidence in traditional nuclear deterrence; rogue states, it was believed, were irrational and might launch attacks on the United States or transfer weapons of mass destruction to terrorist organizations. Thus the global war on terrorism, highlighted by the preventive war against Iraq, became as much a war of counterproliferation as it was a war on terrorism.

The wisdom and necessity of preventive war as a substitute for nuclear deterrence are, however, highly questionable. The evidence strongly suggests that credible nuclear deterrence remains effective against rogue state use of WMD, if not against attacks by fanatical terrorist organizations; unlike terrorist groups, rogue states have critical assets that can be held hostage to the threat of devastating retaliation, and no rogue state has ever used WMD against an enemy capable of such retaliation. Additionally, preventive war is not only contrary to the traditions of American statecraft that have served U.S. security interests so well but also anathema to many long-standing friends and allies.

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**Preventive war can be indistinguishable from outright aggression and has no legal justification.**

## **Introduction**

The term “war on terrorism” does not adequately capture the true scope of the current administration’s overriding post-9/11 foreign policy objective. In truth, the war on terrorism is really a counterproliferation war—the use of force to prevent the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, by state and nonstate entities hostile to the United States.

It was not just an act of terrorism that prompted a sea-change in U.S. security policy; it was also what President Bush called the “crossroads of radicalism and technology,”<sup>1</sup> that is, the specter of terrorists armed with WMD, that moved the administration to embrace the policies explicated in *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, issued in September 2002. The administration justified the U.S. invasion of Iraq on the grounds that Saddam Hussein’s suspected search for nuclear weapons constituted a grave and growing danger to the United States, that he might have had something to do with the 9/11 attacks, and that he might transfer WMD to al Qaeda. Though all of these claims remain unsupported by disclosed evidence, and though unanticipated demands on the U.S. military in postwar Iraq reduce prospects for major U.S. military action against other WMD-seeking rogue states, the administration remains committed to a policy of coercive counterproliferation in circumstances where alternative courses of action are not available.

The distinguishing features of this war on proliferation are (1) the conflation of all terrorist organizations and rogue states as an undifferentiated threat, and (2) the substitution, if deemed necessary and feasible, of threatened or actual preventive military action for traditional nuclear deterrence as a means of dealing with the threat.

To be sure, preventive war is not the only alternative to deterrence. Dissuasion and coercive diplomacy are viable alternatives, a fact evident in the administration’s approaches to nuclear proliferation challenges posed by North Korea and Iran. Scarcity of military

resources alone dictates treating such challenges on a case-by-case basis, and in those cases where U.S. counterproliferation and counterterrorism interests collide, as they do in Pakistan, the former is likely to take a backseat to the latter. Pakistan, though guilty of rampant proliferation of nuclear technology and know-how to the likes of North Korea, Iran, and Libya, is considered an indispensable ally in the war against al Qaeda, especially in the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

Nor is it sensible to claim that circumstances could never arise that would justify a preventive war. It would be foolish to rule out entirely any policy option simply on the basis of its historical association with armed aggression. After all, although deterrence and preventive war reflect different judgments on threat probability and how much risk one is willing to accept, they have the same objective: to protect the United States from catastrophic attack.

The administration’s security policies raise broader questions that go beyond its politics. The controversy surrounding specific administration policy responses to the 9/11 al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the United States should not obscure the critical importance of two fundamental questions those responses seek to address: the utility of nuclear deterrence post-9/11 and the efficacy of preventive war as an alternative to nuclear deterrence.

Rhetorical confusion of preventive and preemptive military action has clouded discussions of the administration’s security policy. The term “preemptive war” refers to the use of force in self-defense against an imminent attack. The classic example of preemptive self-defense is Israel’s military action against Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq in the 1967 Six-Day War. But what the Bush national security strategy calls preemptive war is really “preventive war” to “act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.”<sup>2</sup> As such, preventive war can be indistinguishable from outright aggression and has no legal justification; in contrast, preemptive military action undertaken in accordance with strict legal criteria is legitimate self-defense.

To substitute preventive war for deterrence is to ignore the fact that traditional nuclear deterrence was directed at states *already armed with nuclear weapons* and was aimed at deterring their *use* in time of crisis or war; it was not enlisted as a means deterring the *acquisition* of nuclear weapons. That task was, at least until 9/11, left primarily to the regime established by the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, also known as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and to the U.S. policy of providing nuclear guarantees to allies that might otherwise have felt the need to develop their own nuclear weapons.

The administration's security strategy is further challenged by the broader question of whether it is possible over the long run to prevent proliferation of WMD on the part of states determined to acquire them. Traditional non-proliferation policy implied that nuclear proliferation could be contained and treated all proliferation as undesirable despite evidence that it could be stabilizing as well as destabilizing.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as the American experience with Iraq has shown, preventive war is a costly and risky enterprise subject to the law of unintended consequences. And it is not at all self-evident that preventive war is necessary, at least against states (as opposed to nonstate entities); on the contrary, preventive war may actually encourage proliferation, although the impact of Operation Iraqi Freedom on North Korean and Iranian attitudes toward nuclear weapons remains as yet unclear.

In the final analysis, it is not the mere presence of WMD in hostile hands—but rather their use—that kills and destroys. Accordingly, if their use can be deterred—and the evidence suggests that deterrence does work against rogue states if not terrorist organizations, then deterrence of their use is manifestly a much more attractive policy option than war to prevent their acquisition.

That is not to deny the inherent difficulty of maintaining credible deterrence, especially against adversaries whose culture and values are alien to our own. Deterrence is a psychological phenomenon, and as such is inher-

ently unstable. Nor can one ignore the impossibility of proving the negative. The success of deterrence is measured by events that do not happen, and one cannot demonstrate conclusively that an enemy refrained from this or that action because of the implicit or explicit threat of unacceptable retaliation. The argument here is that deterrence should continue to be the policy of first resort in dealing with hostile states acquiring or seeking to acquire WMD and that preventive war—as opposed to preemptive military action aimed at disrupting an imminent attack—is almost always a bad and ultimately self-defeating option. Richard K. Betts at Columbia University observes that past American arguments for preventive war against the Soviet Union and Mao's China “proved terribly wrong.”<sup>4</sup>

The Bush administration believes that the 9/11 attacks demonstrate a diminished efficacy of nuclear deterrence. With respect to nonstate enemies, especially fanatical terrorist organizations like al Qaeda, deterrence is clearly inadequate. How does one deter an enemy with which one is *already at war* and which presents little in the way of assets—territory, population, governmental infrastructure, and so forth—that can be held hostage to retaliation? Preventive military action, in contrast, is integral to the prosecution of hostilities against state and nonstate enemies; once a war is underway, military action to deny the enemy the ability to fight another day is inevitable and imperative, whether that “another day” is tomorrow or a potential future war years away. To destroy and disrupt is to deny and prevent. Striking first inside a war is not an issue. Thus, in the war against al Qaeda, having “already been attacked, it is logical for the United States . . . to strike first against al Qaeda and similar groups whenever doing so is militarily feasible and effective,” noted Betts before the Iraq War. “The issue arises in regard to states who have not attacked us—at least not yet. This distinction between Iraq and al Qaeda, obscured in much discussion of this issue, must be clearly maintained.”<sup>5</sup>

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So the questions that the administration's post-9/11 strategy must answer are: Does 9/11 demonstrate a diminished efficacy of nuclear deterrence, even against rogue states, and if so, what is the evidence? Was Saddam Hussein's Iraq really undeterred and undeterrable? And haven't the invasion and occupation of a seemingly WMD-less Iraq revealed an exaggeration of the benefits of preventive war as a means of counterproliferation as well as an underestimation of its costs?

## **Deterrence, Nonproliferation, and Counterproliferation before 9/11**

Deterrence, observed Thomas Schelling in his classic *The Strategy of Conflict*, "is concerned with influencing the choices another party will make, and doing it by influencing his expectations of how we will behave. It involves confronting him with evidence for believing that our behavior will be determined by his behavior."<sup>6</sup> More specifically, Colin Gray at the University of Reading in the United Kingdom argues that deterrence "refers to the effect when a person, institution, or polity decides not to take action that otherwise would have been taken, because of the belief or strong suspicion that intolerable consequences would ensue from such action."<sup>7</sup>

With respect to nuclear deterrence, nuclear strategist Albert Wohlstetter, in his seminal January 1959 *Foreign Affairs* article, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," put it in a nutshell: "To deter an attack means being able to strike back in spite of it. It means, in other words, a capability to strike second."<sup>8</sup> Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara explained U.S. policy in 1968:

The cornerstone of our strategic policy continues to be to deter deliberate nuclear attack upon the United States or its allies. We do this by maintaining

a highly reliable ability to inflict unacceptable damage upon any single aggressor or combination of aggressors at any time during the course of a strategic nuclear exchange, even after absorbing a surprise first strike. This can be defined as our *assured-destruction capability*.

Assured destruction is the very essence of the whole deterrence concept. We must possess an actual assured-destruction capability, and that capability also must be credible. . . . If the United States is to deter a nuclear attack on itself or its allies, it must possess an actual and a credible assured-destruction capability.<sup>9</sup>

The key to such a capability was possession of secure retaliatory capabilities—that is, second-strike forces that could "ride out" the enemy's first strike and in turn inflict unacceptable damage on the enemy's homeland. Such capabilities would in essence make the enemy's first strike an act of national suicide. Continued McNamara:

When calculating the force required, we must be conservative in all our estimates of both a potential aggressor's capabilities and his intentions. Security depends on assuming a worst possible case, and having the ability to cope with it. In that eventuality we must be able to absorb the total weight of nuclear attack on our country—on our retaliatory forces, on our command and control apparatus, on our industrial capacity, on our cities, and on our population—and still be capable of damaging the aggressor to the point that his society would be simply no longer viable in twentieth-century terms. That is what deterrence of nuclear aggression means. It means the certainty of suicide to the aggressor, not merely to his military forces, but to his society as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

It remains unclear whether the Soviet

Union fully accepted the logic of assured destruction, which was based on the American assumption of rational decisionmaking on both sides, and on the more specific assumption that the Soviets would, in the face of nuclear threats, behave reasonably by U.S. standards.<sup>11</sup> What is clear is that until the mid-1960s the United States enjoyed a substantial superiority in both first- and second-strike nuclear forces, and that subsequent Soviet attainment of quantitative superiority in land-based first-strike capabilities vis-à-vis the United States never effectively compromised the security of America's devastating second-strike capabilities. By the early 1970s a condition of *mutually* assured destruction had emerged, prompting American nuclear strategists to assume that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union "would ever be sufficiently motivated, foolish, ignorant, or incoherent to accept the risk of nuclear war; both would be rational when it came to calculating the potential costs and benefits in the conduct of their foreign policies."<sup>12</sup>

Though some disputed the postulation of rationality, the fact remains that the Cold War remained cold. From the end of World War II to the end of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union abjured direct military engagement—nuclear or otherwise—as an instrument of policy against each other. Though both constructed vast nuclear arsenals and on occasion threatened their use, they never launched nuclear weapons.

Was there a cause-and-effect relationship between the presence of nuclear weapons and the absence of war? It is easy to assume that a condition of mutual nuclear deterrence accounted for the "long peace." But, as former secretary of state Henry Kissinger (among many others) has pointed out:

Since deterrence can only be tested negatively, by events that do *not* take place, and since it is never possible to demonstrate why something has not occurred, it became especially difficult to assess whether the existing policy was the best possible policy or just

barely an effective one. Perhaps deterrence was even unnecessary because it was impossible to prove whether the adversary ever intended to attack in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it is possible that nuclear weapons had little or nothing to do with the absence of a NATO-Warsaw Pact war.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that even the hardest of hard-line Soviet decisionmakers ever believed that they could attack the United States or U.S. allies in Europe without risking the Soviet Union's own destruction. Did a credible U.S. nuclear deterrent have nothing to do with the absence of war in Europe, where the Soviets enjoyed major—and at times seemingly crushing—conventional military advantages over NATO in Europe? Did it have nothing to do with the Soviet Union's embrace of limited proxy wars as the vehicle for expanding Soviet power and influence in the Third World? Did it have nothing to do with the Soviet back-down during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Though few have argued that nuclear weapons alone kept the Cold War cold (other theories include balance-of-power considerations and the obsolescence of great power war), it is hard to believe that nuclear weapons did not matter—that is, that the threat of instant and unacceptable nuclear retaliation had no deterrent effect. Because survival is the primal instinct of states, as it is of individuals, states are inherently averse to risking their own annihilation. Barry Posen at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology contends that there was a common belief among U.S. decisionmakers at the end of the Cold War "that nuclear weapons deter nuclear attacks on oneself or one's allies, and arguably deter conventional invasion of one's own territory, and to a lesser and more debatable extent, the territory of one's allies."<sup>15</sup> If so, this is no mean accomplishment. But there is more: nuclear weapons may also deter use of nonnuclear weapons of mass destruction. For example, the available evidence suggests that credible nuclear deter-

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rence accounted in part for the absence of Iraqi chemical attacks on Israel, Saudi Arabia, or coalition forces during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990–91.<sup>16</sup>

That said, nuclear deterrence, like its non-nuclear varieties, is a psychological process and therefore inherently difficult to manage. Colin Gray astutely points out that “the intended deterree is at liberty to refuse to allow his policy to be controlled by foreign menaces.” In other words, “Whether or not the intended deterree decides he is deterred is a decision that remains strictly in his hands.”<sup>17</sup> And his decision may be governed by not only an entirely different set of values than that of the deterrer but also a much greater stake in the outcome of the crisis at hand. Keith Payne at the National Institute for Public Policy and Dale Walton at Southwest Missouri State University observe that the presumption of rationality “does not . . . imply that the decision-maker’s prioritization of goals and values will be shared by or considered sensible to outside observers. Nor does rationality imply that any particular moral standard guides the selection of goals and values.” In fact, “rational decision making can underlie behavior judged to be unreasonable, shocking, and even criminal by an observer because that behavior is so far removed from any shared norms and standards. Rational leaders with extreme ideological commitments, for instance, may have goals that appear irrational to outside observers.”<sup>18</sup> Johnson administration decisionmakers in 1965 fatally underestimated North Vietnam’s strength of interest in the struggle for South Vietnam and believed that Hanoi could be brought to heel via a coercive bombing campaign. They failed to understand that a reunified Vietnam under communist auspices was a nonnegotiable war aim for Hanoi and, for that very reason, that the Vietnamese communists were prepared to make—and made—manpower sacrifices “irrational” in magnitude.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, the deterree, whatever his values and priorities, might not regard a deterrent threat as credible. The foundation of successful deterrence is the deterree’s conviction that the deterrer means what he says,

that he has the will to do what he threatens to do. Nonnuclear deterrence was a significant problem for the United States in the years separating defeat in Vietnam and the 9/11 attacks. The so-called “Vietnam syndrome,” enshrined in the Weinberger-Powell doctrine and reinforced by humiliating military evacuations under fire in Lebanon and Somalia and by agonizing indecision in the Balkans, conveyed an image of military power greatly in excess of a willingness to use it and use it decisively. Both Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were motivated to attack U.S. interests in part out of a low regard for America’s willingness to sustain bloody combat overseas.

The apparent success of nuclear deterrence before 9/11 was conditioned by two factors: it was directed against the *use* of nuclear weapons by *states* possessing such weapons. Nuclear deterrence did not seek to prevent states from acquiring nuclear weapons—it sought instead to prevent their use by holding hostage the enemy state’s targetable territory, leadership, industry, military forces, and cities. Nuclear deterrence moreover did not have to concern itself with threats posed by nonstate actors armed with weapons of mass destruction.

With respect to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other states, the United States grudgingly accepted their acquisition by selected allies—the United Kingdom; France; and more covertly, Israel—but sought to curb their proliferation in the rest of the world. The principal vehicles for this policy were the extension of U.S. deterrence to states that otherwise might have felt compelled to develop their own nuclear arsenals, as well as the NPT and the subsequent legal and normative regime that rose up around it.

The NPT regime is essentially a bargain between nuclear “haves” and “have-nots.” In exchange for foreswearing development of nuclear weapons, the have-nots obligate the haves to provide the knowledge and assistance to develop nuclear energy for nonmilitary purposes. The NPT also pledges the haves to the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons.

The have-nots, in turn, agree to have their nuclear programs inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency at self-declared sites. The regime and its associated nonproliferation efforts, which include various regional nuclear-free zones, agreements between suppliers to restrict transfer of nuclear- and missile-related technologies and materials to particular potential recipients, and a U.S. commitment not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against have-not states, have enjoyed remarkable success in retarding nuclear weapons proliferation. (To be sure, other factors, such as the enormous cost of a nuclear weapons program, account for the low proliferation rate.) Since 1968, only five states have acquired nuclear weapons. Of the five, three (Israel, India, and Pakistan) were not signatories to the NPT, and one (South Africa) relinquished its nuclear weapons and joined the NPT. The fifth (North Korea) has been twice caught cheating on its international obligations and has now entered negotiations of an uncertain outcome. Additionally, the United States and other like-minded NPT regime supporters have successfully encouraged several states (Argentina, Brazil, South Korea, and Taiwan) to cease work on suspected nuclear weapons programs and other states (Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine) to give up nuclear weapons they inherited from the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup>

The success of the NPT has been reinforced by U.S. defense commitments that reassure allies that they can forswear nuclear weapons without endangering their security. To the extent that insecurity is a motive for acquiring nuclear weapons, a U.S. defense guarantee reduces that insecurity to tolerable levels as long as the guarantee remains credible. This reassurance has been especially critical for South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Germany, all of which have had the capacity to “go nuclear” and would have had the incentive to do so absent the extension of credible nuclear deterrence by the United States. As Michael Tkacik at Stephen F. Austin State University observes: “There are many reasons to believe nuclear proliferation would have been far greater with-

out U.S. possession of large, usable forces. Allies and enemies alike would have been driven to acquire such weapons: enemies, because such weapons would then matter; allies, to protect themselves.”<sup>21</sup>

Neither the NPT nor U.S.-extended nuclear deterrence guarantees nonproliferation, however. Adherence to the NPT is voluntary; moreover, signatories, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, can and have violated its provisions by pursuing covert nuclear weapons programs, and, in the case of North Korea, have simply withdrawn from the treaty. Indeed, it was the manifest deficiencies of the NPT regime—that is, the emergence of treaty-signatory rogue states seeking nuclear weapons—that prompted the United States to embrace the concept of counterproliferation in the early 1990s and preventive war against Iraq a decade later.

The Defense Counter-Proliferation Initiative was launched by the Clinton administration in 1993 and stemmed from President George H. W. Bush’s directive to the defense department “to develop new capabilities to defend against proliferants, including capabilities for preemptive military action.”<sup>22</sup> The directive followed the discovery, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, of an Iraqi nuclear weapons program larger and more advanced than prewar intelligence estimates had projected. The move toward counterproliferation was also facilitated by the disappearance of the Soviet threat, which removed a potential check on U.S. freedom of military action overseas.

Counterproliferation expert Barry Schneider, from the United States Air Force Counterproliferation Center, contends that the basic difference between nonproliferation and counterproliferation is that the former “features the velvet glove of the diplomat,” whereas the latter features “the iron fist of the military.”<sup>23</sup> Counterproliferation focuses on protecting U.S. interests and forces in confrontations with enemies already armed with WMD. It encompasses deterrence, sanctions, defensive measures (such as anti-ballistic missile defenses and vaccines against biological weapons attacks), and the capacity for, as Secretary of Defense William J. Perry declared

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in 1995, *disabling or destroying* enemy WMD assets in time of conflict, if necessary through counterforce attacks.”<sup>24</sup> James J. Wirtz of the Naval Postgraduate School, writing in 2000, characterized counterproliferation primarily as “an effort to use conventional weapons to deny proliferants military benefits from threatening to use or actually using nuclear weapons against U.S. forces or allies.” In his view, as well as that of the Clinton administration defense department, anticipatory military action as a tool of counterproliferation would necessarily be nonnuclear. Given the strength of the taboo against using nuclear weapons, Wirtz contends that it “would be difficult, if not impossible, to convince an attentive global audience why it was necessary to use nuclear weapons to preserve the international norm against nuclear non-use and proliferation.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, before 9/11 counterproliferation was viewed primarily as a conventional counterforce challenge: the threatened or actual use of nonnuclear weapons to deter or prevent a nuclear adversary from using nuclear weapons. Counterproliferation was not taken to include nuclear first strikes or preventive war aimed at stopping a regime from acquiring WMD. Intra-war attacks on enemy WMD facilities were envisaged, but not starting a war itself—and certainly not a nuclear war. The common view was that counterproliferation activities should remain within the bounds of international law, which prohibits military strikes against states not at war except in circumstances of imminent and indisputable enemy attack.<sup>26</sup> (Thus, the Reagan administration condemned the 1981 Israeli preventive air strike on the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak.) If radical regimes could not be dissuaded or deterred from acquiring WMD, they could at least be deterred from using them.

## **How 9/11 Changed U.S. Security Policy**

The September 11, 2001, al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the United States prompted major changes in U.S. security policy. The

Bush administration declared a war on terrorism that targeted both terrorist organizations and so-called “rogue states.” The core of the postulated threat is the prospective marriage of terrorism and WMD, especially nuclear weapons, with terrorist organizations acquiring WMD from rogue states or rogue states themselves using WMD for purposes of intimidation or aggression. Given the questionable utility of traditional deterrence against rogue states and especially terrorist organizations, argues the administration, the United States cannot afford to wait for either to acquire WMD and use them first against U.S. interests. America must be prepared to strike first against aspiring WMD possessors, especially rogue states seeking nuclear weapons. It was this reasoning that underpinned the decision to attack Iraq. As Robert Litwak at Georgetown University correctly observes, “The Iraq War [is] the first case in which forcible regime change was the means employed to achieve nonproliferation ends.”<sup>27</sup> The war on terrorism is thus also a war of counterproliferation, and it is a war, against nonstate terrorist organizations and rogue states, which administration spokesmen also term “terrorist states.”<sup>28</sup>

What commentators have called the “Bush Doctrine” has been explicated in a number of presidential speeches<sup>29</sup> and in three major policy declarations: *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (September 2002), *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction* (December 2002), and *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (February 2003).

*The National Security Strategy* declares that the “U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better.”<sup>30</sup> President Bush’s cover letter to the document states: “The greatest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination. The



United States will not allow those efforts to succeed. . . . America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.”<sup>31</sup> But the ability to so act requires unchallengeable military power. Thus in his June 1, 2002, speech at West Point, the president declared: “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge—thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.”<sup>32</sup> *The National Security Strategy* reiterates: “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military buildup in the hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”<sup>33</sup>

The administration thus defines the threat as extremism plus unprecedented destructive capacity. “When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology—when that occurs,” said the president at West Point, “even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations. Our enemies have declared this very intention, and have been caught seeking these terrible weapons. They want the capability to blackmail us, or to harm us, or to harm our friends.”<sup>34</sup> Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld subsequently spoke of a “nexus between terrorist networks, terrorist states, and weapons of mass destruction . . . that can make mighty adversaries of small or impoverished states and even relatively small groups of individuals.”<sup>35</sup>

The administration identifies three threat agents: terrorist organizations with global reach, weak states that harbor and assist such terrorist organizations, and rogue states. Al Qaeda and the Taliban’s Afghanistan embody the first two agents, respectively. Rogue states are defined as states that brutalize their own people, disregard international law and threaten their neighbors, seek to acquire WMD for purposes of aggression, sponsor terrorism around the world, reject human values, and hate the United States and everything it stands for.<sup>36</sup> The two most threatening aspects of rogue states are their inherent aggressive-

ness and eagerness to acquire WMD, especially nuclear weapons, which are believed not to be for defensive purposes. In his January 2003 State of the Union address, the president declared:

Today, the gravest danger in the war on terror, the gravest danger facing America and the world, is outlaw regimes that seek and possess nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. These regimes could use such weapons for blackmail, terror, and mass murder. They could also give or sell those weapons to terrorist allies, who would use them without the least hesitation.<sup>37</sup>

The president subsequently spoke of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq:

Year after year, Saddam Hussein has gone to great lengths, spent enormous sums, taken great risks to build and keep weapons of mass destruction. But why? The only possible explanation, the only possible use he could have for those weapons is to dominate, intimidate, or attack. With nuclear arms . . . Saddam Hussein could resume his ambitions of conquest in the Middle East and create deadly havoc in that region.<sup>38</sup>

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had asserted that rogue states’ “unrelenting drive to possess weapons of mass destruction brings about the *inevitability* that they will be used against us or our interests.”<sup>39</sup> Vice President Dick Cheney, speaking of Iraq in August 2002, declared: “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction [and that] he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us.”<sup>40</sup>

A key feature of the administration’s postulation of the threat is its assertion that Cold War concepts of deterrence and containment are insufficient to deal with WMD-seeking rogue states and are irrelevant

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against terrorist organizations. In his West Point speech, President Bush declared:

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. Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.

He added:

We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the words of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systematically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.<sup>41</sup>

*The National Security Strategy* states that during the Cold War the United States “faced a generally status-quo, risk-averse adversary. . . . But deterrence based only on the threat of retaliation is less likely to work against leaders of rogue states more willing to take risks, gambling with the lives of their people, and the wealth of their nation.”<sup>42</sup>

In discussing the threat the president also stressed its urgency. Less than two months after the 9/11 attacks, he declared: “We will not wait for the authors of mass murder to gain weapons of mass destruction.” In his January 2002 State of the Union address, the president warned: “Time is not on our side. I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive

weapons.”<sup>43</sup> *The National Security Strategy* declares simply: “We cannot let our enemies strike first.”<sup>44</sup> In a September 2002 CNN interview, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice claimed that the risk of waiting for conclusive proof of Saddam Hussein’s determination to acquire nuclear weapons was too great because “we don’t want the smoking gun to become a mushroom cloud,”<sup>45</sup> a metaphor the president subsequently repeated.<sup>46</sup>

Complementing *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* is the *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, which embraces counterproliferation to combat WMD use, strengthened non-proliferation to combat WMD proliferation, and consequence management to respond to WMD use. The document declares that rogue states do not regard WMD as weapons of last resort, but rather as “militarily useful weapons of choice intended to overcome our nation’s advantages in conventional forces and to deter us from responding to aggression against our friends and allies in regions of vital interest.”<sup>47</sup> With respect to counterproliferation, it declares, “We must enhance the capabilities of our military, intelligence, technical, and law enforcement communities to prevent the movement of WMD materials, technology, and expertise to hostile states and terrorist organizations.”<sup>48</sup> It also calls for “capabilities to detect and destroy an adversary’s WMD assets before these weapons are used.”<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, the *National Strategy to Combat Terrorism* declares, “We require new methods of deterrence” because rogue states “have demonstrated their willingness to take high risks to achieve their goals, and are aggressively pursuing WMD and their means of delivery as critical tools in this effort.” As a consequence, the “United States will continue to make clear that it reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force—including through resort to all of our options—to the use of WMD against the United States, our forces abroad, and friends and allies.”<sup>50</sup>

The administration’s willingness to use force to stop rogue states from acquiring WMD—a euphemism for nuclear weapons—

was demonstrated by its decision to launch a war against Iraq to prevent that country from some day confronting the United States with “a mushroom cloud.” It is no less evident in the administration’s widely reported interest in new nuclear weapons technologies designed to destroy suspected rogue states’ subterranean nuclear program facilities. Absent nonviolent options for stopping rogue state acquisition of nuclear weapons, there are essentially only two ways to prevent it: overthrow the offending regime and replace it with a regime that doesn’t have WMD ambitions, or launch counterforce strikes at the offending regime’s WMD facilities. Both involve preventive military action and entail considerable risk.

Reported administration interest in small nuclear “bunker-busting” munitions is consistent with administration determination to halt rogue state acquisition of nuclear weapons by any means necessary.<sup>51</sup> Though the United States has yet to strike a rogue state’s suspected nuclear facilities (outside the context of a war already underway), the very development of such munitions reflects a policy determination to obtain “capabilities to detect and destroy an adversary’s WMD assets before these weapons are used.”<sup>52</sup> However, like the launching of preventive war, the actual use of these weapons in an “out-of-the-blue” strike could have severely negative long-term strategic consequences for the United States. Preventive war and nuclear strikes are inherently dangerous policy options.

## **Preventive War as a Substitute for Deterrence**

Preventive war is an alternative to nuclear deterrence, although both policy options seek to protect the United States from catastrophic attack. If one has no confidence in deterring an adversary’s future use of WMD, and if one cannot compel him to abandon the search by means short of war, then preventive war becomes the least unattractive option. The Bush administration does not believe that nuclear deterrence provides the United States

enough insurance against what it regards as a catastrophic threat, i.e., a nuclear, chemical, or biological 9/11. Even if such a threat were of low probability, its consequences would be so horrific as to justify preventive military action. Accordingly, the administration has purchased additional insurance in the form of a policy of preventive war.

Preventive war, however, is to be clearly distinguished from preemptive military action. The latter is officially defined as “an attack initiated on the basis of incontrovertible evidence that an enemy attack is imminent.”<sup>53</sup> Preemption is justifiable if it meets Secretary of State Daniel Webster’s strict criteria, enunciated in 1837 and still the legal standard, that the threat be “instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means or no moment of deliberation.”<sup>54</sup> Under these exceptional circumstances, preemption has legal sanction because, as Chris Brown at the London School of Economics points out, “the right to preempt is . . . an extension of the right of self-defense.”<sup>55</sup> An enemy army massing on or approaching one’s borders in a self-evidently threatening way and within the context of extreme political hostility invites preemption. Though preemption is rare, the preemptive motive was a powerful force behind the rush to war of Germany, Russia, and France in July 1914; Chinese intervention in the Korean War in 1951; and the Israeli attack on Egypt in 1967.<sup>56</sup> In each case the preempting party faced, or had very good reason to believe that it faced, an impending enemy attack.

In contrast, preventive war is “a war initiated in the belief that military conflict, while not imminent, is inevitable, and that to delay would involve greater risk.”<sup>57</sup> Harvard’s Graham Allison has captured the logic of preventive war: “I may some day have a war with you, and right now I’m strong and you’re not. So I’m going to have the war now.”<sup>58</sup> In December 1912 chief of staff of the German Army Helmut von Moltke opposed a diplomatic solution to a Balkan crisis at hand because he believed that Germany’s military power was peaking vis-à-

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**Preventive war assumes that conflict with the rising state is inevitable, and therefore striking before the military balance worsens becomes imperative.**

vis that of France and, especially, Russia, which was rapidly modernizing its army and expanding its railroad system. "I believe war to be inevitable, and the sooner the better," he said.<sup>59</sup> David Frum and Richard Perle (both at the American Enterprise Institute) make the same argument a century later: "Why let an enemy grow stronger? By waiting . . . we forfeit the initiative. We cast away the opportunity to act at a time and place of our choosing and gamble our security on future circumstances that may or may not be favorable to us."<sup>60</sup>

Dale Copeland at the University of Virginia argues that preventive war is "typically initiated by dominant military powers that fear significant decline."<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Copeland points out that the basic argument of the literature on preventive war is that "states in decline fear the future" and "worry that if they allow a rising state to grow, it will either attack them later with superior power or coerce them into concessions that compromise their security."<sup>62</sup> Better, therefore, to attack the rising state while the military balance is still unfavorable to it, than to wait to be dominated. Steven Van Evera at MIT contends that an "impending power shift . . . creates a one-sided incentive: the declining state wants an early war, while the rising state wants to avoid war until after the power shift. Specifically, the declining state strikes 'preventively,' launching war now to prevent later conflict under worse circumstances."<sup>63</sup>

This reasoning is consistent with the rationale behind the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration believed that Saddam Hussein had a reconstituted nuclear weapons program that would have armed Iraq with a nuclear arsenal that could have permitted it to challenge U.S. military supremacy in the Persian Gulf or even attack the United States. This reasoning also explains Saddam Hussein's military passivity and acceptance of U.N. weapons inspections before the U.S.-Iraq war of 2003. Given Iraq's lack of a nuclear deterrent and the decrepitude of its conventional military forces, Saddam wasn't about to pick a fight with the

United States. More generally, preventive war reasoning is consistent with the administration's declared determination to keep U.S. military forces strong enough to dissuade adversaries from pursuing a military buildup in the hopes of surpassing or equaling the power of the United States.

Preventive war is thus prompted, not by a looming enemy attack, but rather by long-range calculations about power relationships, and it is attractive to states that believe themselves to be in decline relative to a rising adversary. Preventive war assumes that conflict with the rising state is inevitable, and therefore striking before the military balance worsens becomes imperative. Thus, the Japanese in 1941 not only assumed the inevitability of war with the United States but also the necessity to attack before America's growing rearmament tipped the military balance hopelessly against Japan. The Japanese were well aware of America's enormous latent military power and felt compelled to strike before it was fully mobilized. On the eve of Pearl Harbor, Japanese naval and air power was unrivaled in East Asia; France, Britain, and the Netherlands were no longer in a position to defend their empires in the region; and the Soviet threat to Japan had vanished with Hitler's invasion of Russia. Never again would Japan enjoy such a favorable military position relative to her enemies in East Asia.<sup>64</sup>

Though one can question Copeland's thesis that the perceived necessity for preventive war is the root cause of all major great power wars, preventive wars are certainly far more numerous than preemptive military actions. Indeed, notes Richard Betts, "preventive wars . . . are common, if one looks at the rationales of those who start wars, since most countries that launch an attack without an immediate provocation believe their actions are preventive."<sup>65</sup> Preventive war is thus hard to distinguish from aggression, which explains why it, unlike preemption, has no legal sanction. As foreign policy analyst David Hendrickson at Colorado College observes, preventive war "is directly contrary to the principle that so often

was the rallying cry of American internationalism in the twentieth century,” during the first half of which “doctrines of preventive war were closely identified with the German and Japanese strategic traditions.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Cuban Missile Crisis**

The Cuban Missile Crisis is instructive with respect to America’s traditional aversion to preventive war. This most dangerous of Cold War confrontations stemmed from the American reaction to a Soviet move that threatened an abrupt alteration in the strategic nuclear balance. Analyses of Soviet motives for surreptitiously placing medium-range and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962 vary, but most agree that a major motive was a perceived opportunity to reverse the Soviet Union’s profound and humiliating inferiority in intercontinental-range nuclear weapons.<sup>67</sup> In October 1961 the Kennedy administration had dispelled the myth of Soviet nuclear superiority—the product of an effective Kremlin campaign of strategic deception—by publicly revealing a huge and growing numerical advantage in land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and long-range bombers that gave the United States “a second-strike capability which is at least as extensive as what the Soviets can deliver by striking first.”<sup>68</sup> Technically reliable Soviet medium-range and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba—the latter capable of striking almost the entire continental United States—would be more than the functional equivalent of unreliable intercontinental missiles deployed in the Soviet Union and would greatly increase the weight of a first strike. At the time, the United States had a 4-to-1 advantage over the Soviet Union in ICBMs and a 17-to-1 superiority in deliverable warheads and bombs against the Soviet Union.<sup>69</sup> A rising nuclear state thus sought a short-cut to undermine an unfavorable nuclear balance.

Some Kennedy administration members of the executive committee of the National Security Council established to deal with the

crisis completely missed this particular Soviet motive because they believed in minimal deterrence and rejected the idea of a winnable nuclear war. “The trouble was,” notes Robert Kagan at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “that Khrushchev did not think as they did and did not believe in minimal deterrence. He believed that nuclear war was possible, that it could be won, and therefore that nuclear superiority mattered very much. . . . What he wanted was a credible nuclear force that would paralyze the Americans and prevent them from using their nuclear threat to prevent Soviet advances around the world.”<sup>70</sup> In the end, the administration, at considerable risk of nuclear war, nonetheless employed coercive diplomacy to force withdrawal of the missiles.

A notable aspect of the crisis from its onset was President Kennedy’s pronounced aversion to a military solution notwithstanding the contrary opinion of all of his military and most of his civilian advisers, who favored air strikes against the missile sites, an invasion of Cuba, or both. Given America’s crushing global nuclear superiority and conventional military supremacy in the Caribbean, there was little chance of a successful Soviet-Cuban defense of the island, and an invasion would eliminate both the missiles and a Castro regime whose removal had become a Kennedy obsession. President Kennedy nonetheless opted for a coercive diplomatic solution. He was convinced that the crisis was pregnant with the potential for miscalculation that could prompt uncontrollable escalation into a U.S.-Soviet nuclear exchange.

But there was another argument against direct U.S. military action against Cuba that by all accounts influenced the president and those of his advisers who favored diplomacy over war. It was believed that an American attack would be analogous to the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and as such, in the words of Undersecretary of State George Ball, would be “contrary to our traditions . . . would cut directly athwart [what] we have stood for during our national history, and condemn us as hypocrites in the opinion of

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the world.”<sup>71</sup> The president’s influential brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, also opposed a military strike because, he said, “it would be a Pearl Harbor type of attack.”<sup>72</sup> By the sixth day of the 13-day crisis, President Kennedy himself was referring to the air strike–invasion option as “this particular Pearl Harbor recommendation.”<sup>73</sup>

The Pearl Harbor analogy was, of course, questionable given the recklessness and magnitude of the Soviet provocation in Cuba. An aversion to besmirching America’s reputation by launching what the Kennedy brothers believed to be the functional equivalent of a Pearl Harbor attack nonetheless played a major role in the nonviolent resolution of the crisis.<sup>74</sup>

**Preventive War and the Soviet Union**

Although the concept of preventive war against another state for the purpose of altering relative power trends is incompatible with America’s strategic tradition, the use of such a strategy was once considered vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and later, Communist China. From the end of World War II until the early 1950s there were calls within the national security establishment, especially among the military leadership, for war to prevent the Soviet Union from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>75</sup> From 1945 to 1949 the United States enjoyed an atomic weapons monopoly and throughout the 1950s a crushing superiority in deliverable nuclear weapons. Proponents of preventive war, which included the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, the mathematician John Von Neumann, U.S. Secretary of the Navy Francis Matthews, senior U.S. Air Force leaders, and even Winston Churchill, assumed that war with the Soviet Union was probable, even certain, and that America’s nuclear supremacy would inevitably erode as the Soviet Union exploded its first bomb and went on to build a nuclear arsenal.<sup>76</sup> Preventive warriors also believed that the Soviet Union sought nuclear weapons for purposes of blackmail and aggression and that Moscow would not hesitate to use those

weapons if the nuclear balance shifted to its clear advantage. This in turn suggested a conviction that war, if it came, would be simply the product of military vulnerability rather than a political crisis. The Americans projected their own logic onto the Soviets: after all, if even Americans could consider launching a war solely on the basis of perceived military trends, would not the Soviets almost certainly be prepared to do so?

As early as January 1946, just five months after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, General Leslie Groves, wartime head of the Manhattan Project, wrote a memorandum that raised the issue of preventive war. “If we were ruthlessly realistic, we would not permit any foreign power with which we are not firmly allied, and in which we do not have absolute confidence, to make or possess atomic weapons,” he wrote. “If such a country started to make atomic weapons we would destroy its capacity to make them before it had progressed far enough to threaten us.”<sup>77</sup>

Over the next seven years senior Air Force leaders, including generals “George Kenney, Curtis LeMay, Thomas Power, Nathan Twining, Thomas White, and Hoyt Vandenberg all privately expressed sympathy for preventive war, and official Air Force doctrine manuals continued to support preventive war ideas.”<sup>78</sup> In August 1950 Navy Secretary Matthews gave a speech in which he called for a “war of aggression” against the Soviet Union; Americans should become “aggressors for peace,” he said.<sup>79</sup> A month later Major General Orville Anderson, commandant of the Air War College, told a newspaper reporter that, given the authority to do so, he would order a nuclear strike against fledgling Soviet atomic capabilities. “Give me the order to do it and I can break up Russia’s five A-bomb nests in a week,” he said. “And when I went to Christ, I think I could explain to Him why I wanted to do it now before it’s too late. I think I could explain to Him that I had saved civilization. With it [the A-bomb] used in time, we can immobilize a foe [and prevent] his crime before it happened.”<sup>80</sup> These comments prompted President Truman to fire Anderson

and publicly denounce preventive war. “We do not believe in aggression or preventive war,” he said in a radio broadcast. “Such a war is the weapon of dictators, not of free democratic countries like the United States.”<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, preventive war against the Soviet Union remained just an idea because both Truman and Eisenhower rejected it—Truman on moral and political grounds, and Eisenhower (who briefly considered preventive war) because he believed that the postwar tasks of occupying and administering a nuclear war-devastated Soviet Union were beyond America’s resources.<sup>82</sup> Reinforcing Truman’s and Eisenhower’s rejection of preventive war was America’s conventional military weakness vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. According to Copeland, a war with the Soviet Union would be a war with a state whose massive conventional military forces could swiftly overrun Europe, forcing the United States “to fight a long war from England, the Azores, and North Africa. Given these distances, and given the strong Soviet air-defense system, it would be difficult to achieve a decisive victory.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Preventive War and China**

The lure of preventive war—this time against China—returned briefly during the early 1960s. Military action against China’s fledgling nuclear weapons program was seriously considered within the Kennedy administration. The president and his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, believed that a nuclear China would be intolerable because possession of nuclear weapons would embolden Mao Zedong to commit blackmail and aggression. President Lyndon B. Johnson subsequently rejected proposals for preventive strikes for a variety of reasons, including confidence in the U.S. nuclear arsenal to deter any Chinese first-use of nuclear weapons, belief that China sought nuclear weapons primarily for reasons of deterrence and prestige, and fear that China might retaliate against U.S. bases and allies in East Asia. President Johnson was simply not prepared to risk a potentially open-ended war with China for the sake of military

action that would at best postpone—not prevent—China’s eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons.<sup>84</sup>

### **Preventive War and Iraq**

The feasibility of a preventive war against Iraq in 2003 was not an issue. Iraq was politically isolated and militarily helpless—it had neither nuclear weapons nor competitive conventional forces. The United States had no superpower rival and enjoyed global military primacy. It could overthrow the Iraqi regime, directly attack Iraq’s suspected WMD facilities, or both.

Yet the ease with which Operation Iraqi Freedom toppled Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship in the spring of 2003 was strategically misleading. The American war on Iraq and its ongoing aftermath exemplify the risks and penalties of preventive war, especially preventive war aimed at regime change. First, the war exposed a massive U.S. intelligence failure, which suggests the United States cannot sustain a strategy of anticipatory self-defense because such a strategy presumes—indeed, rests upon—near perfect knowledge of enemy capabilities and long-term intentions.<sup>85</sup>

This was not the first U.S. intelligence failure with respect to Iraqi WMD. During the run-up to the first American war with Iraq, the intelligence community greatly *underestimated* the scope and status of Iraq’s nuclear weapons program.<sup>86</sup> Twelve years later, after the second U.S. war with Iraq, Center for Strategic and International Studies military analyst Anthony H. Cordesman contended that, “the United States and Britain went to war with Iraq without the level of evidence needed to provide a clear strategic rationale for the war and without the ability to fully understand the threat that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction posed to U.S., British, and Australian forces.” Though there were other reasons advanced for going to war with Iraq, the absence of any discovered Iraqi WMD, continues Cordesman, “*is* a definitive warning that . . . intelligence and targeting are not yet adequate to support grand strategy, strategy, and tactical operations against prolifer-

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ating powers or to make accurate assessments about the need to preempt.”<sup>87</sup> Conservative commentator George F. Will contends that the “failure . . . to find, or explain the absence of, weapons of mass destruction that were the necessary and sufficient justification for preemptive war” places the “doctrine of preemption—the core of the president’s foreign policy . . . in jeopardy.”<sup>88</sup> (It is worth noting that during the Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. intelligence failed to detect the presence in Cuba of nearly 100 Soviet battlefield nuclear missiles, which the Soviet commander in Cuba had been granted authority to fire in defense of the island from an American invasion. Thus a U.S. invasion of Cuba—favored by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and key civilian advisers to President Kennedy—could have unwittingly initiated a nuclear war.)<sup>89</sup>

Obtaining an accurate picture of a secretive enemy’s capabilities and intentions is an inherently difficult and risk-prone challenge, and the process of intelligence collection and analysis can be fatally compromised by political pressures to reach desired conclusions. Some believe such pressures were exerted in 2002–03 to inflate the scope and imminence of the Iraqi WMD threat.<sup>90</sup> One thing, however, seems certain: there was a dearth of reliable human intelligence inside Iraq that could have provided a more accurate picture of the threat than simply the supposition that Saddam Hussein must have resumed work on the banned WMD program after his expulsion of U.N. inspectors in 1998. Indeed, argues Cordesman, “the only definitive way” to determine the presence and scope of a secret WMD program “is to have a reliable mix of redundant human intelligent sources within the system or as defectors.” Unfortunately, the United States “has never claimed or implied it had such capabilities in any proliferating country, and the history of U.S., British, [and U.N.] efforts to deal with Iraq makes it painfully clear . . . that most Iraqi defectors and intelligence sources outside Iraq made up information, circulated unsubstantiated information, or simply lied.”<sup>91</sup> (According to

*Plan of Attack*, the account of the George W. Bush administration’s preparation for war against Iraq by *Washington Post* correspondent Bob Woodward, the Central Intelligence Agency had only four human sources of intelligence inside Iraq, all of them serving in government ministries peripheral to the search for WMD.)<sup>92</sup> Indeed, if the U.S. intelligence community completely missed the boat on Iraq’s WMD capabilities, by what means could it hope to divine the inherently more difficult to determine issue of Iraq’s intentions?

The bottom line is that an effective strategy of counterproliferation via preventive war requires intelligence of a consistent quality and reliability that may not be obtainable within the real-world limits of collection and analysis by the U.S. intelligence community.

In addition to exposing an embarrassing U.S. intelligence failure, the second war against Iraq entangled the United States in a costly and open-ended insurgent conflict that threatens Iraq’s reconstruction as well as the U.S. ability to deal effectively with major military contingencies that might arise elsewhere. Prewar expectations of a swift and clean decapitation of the Ba’athist leadership and its ready replacement by a government of Iraqi exiles, of functioning government ministries, security forces, rapidly restored high output oil production, readily available electric power, and—above all—an absence of insurgent violence, did not materialize.<sup>93</sup> The result has been a war that never really ended and a continuing commitment of blood and treasure that may prove difficult to sustain politically over the long haul.<sup>94</sup>

Removing the old Stalinist-model regime in Iraq was always going to be easier than creating a new, reformed government, especially a stable democratic one. The abrupt and utter collapse of the old regime has confronted the United States with the Herculean task of democratic state-building from scratch in a country in which the old Sunni Arab ruling minority continues to resist pacification and in which an enfranchised Shi’ite majority could produce an Iraq hostile to U.S. security interests in the Islamic world. American polit-



ical successes in post-1945 Germany and Japan provide little instruction for U.S. policymakers responsible for Iraq. The German, Japanese, and international circumstances of 1945 are not analogous to today's Iraq and world. Perhaps most importantly, unconditional surrender by governments whose decisions to surrender were politically accepted by the German and Japanese people—a circumstance absent in Iraq—meant that there was little or no postwar resistance to U.S. rule.<sup>95</sup>

Third, the decision to attack a country that was neither at war with nor posed a credible threat to the United States alienated key friends and allies (including France, Germany, Canada, and Mexico), who may not have been necessary to successfully prosecute the war but could have greatly contributed to postwar peacekeeping operations and reconstruction efforts. As a result, the United States was doomed to a “go it alone” strategy where a “coalition of the willing” did not translate into a “coalition of the capable.”

To be sure, Operation Iraqi Freedom destroyed a despicable regime and opened the door to the possibility of democratic governance in an Arab heartland. But it also raised questions about U.S. willingness to consider allied and world opinion or to restrain the employment of its unprecedented military power, the perpetuation of which is a declared goal of *The National Security Strategy*. We have “a special obligation to rest our policies on principles that transcend the assertions of preponderant power,” wrote Henry Kissinger in September 2002. “World leadership requires acceptance of some restraint even on one’s actions to ensure that others exercise comparable restraint. It cannot be in either our national or the world’s interest to develop principles that grant every nation an unfettered right of preemption against its own definition of threats to its security.”<sup>96</sup> Brent Scowcroft, President George H.W. Bush’s national security adviser, is even more troubled:

Part of the Bush administration believes that as a superpower we must take advantage of this opportunity to

change the world for the better, and we don’t need to go out of our way to accommodate alliances, partnerships, or friends in the process, because that would be too constraining. [But relying almost solely on ad hoc] coalitions of the willing is fundamentally, fatally flawed. As we’ve seen in the debate about Iraq, it’s already given us an image of arrogance and unilateralism, and we’re paying a very high price for that image. If we get to the point where everyone secretly hopes the United States gets a black eye because we’re so obnoxious, then we’ll be totally hamstrung in the war on terror. We’ll be like Gulliver with the Lilliputians.<sup>97</sup>

In the British historian Sir Michael Howard’s view:

An explicit American hegemony may appear [to the administration] preferable to the messy compromises of the existing order, but if it is nakedly based on . . . military power it will lack all legitimacy. Terror will continue, and worse, widespread sympathy with terror. But American power placed at the service of an international community legitimized by representative institutions and the rule of law, accepting its constraints and inadequacies but continually working to improve them: that is a very different matter. [The United States] must cease to think of itself as a heroic lone protagonist in a cosmic war against “evil,” and reconcile itself to a less spectacular and more humdrum role: that of the leading participant in a flawed but still indispensable system of cooperative global governance.<sup>98</sup>

Fourth, the establishment of a large American military presence in an Arab heartland may have opened a new front for Islamist terrorists. Terrorism in Iraq was a state monopoly under Saddam Hussein, who

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effectively repressed the Islamist community. With the fall of his regime and subsequent emergence of an insurgency against coalition forces and reconstruction targets, however, Iraq could become a strategic opportunity for al Qaeda and al Qaeda-inspired terrorists.

“The foreign fighters who have crossed into Iraq from Syria, Iran and Palestine to join Hussein loyalists in attacks on American soldiers know how much is at stake,” concluded Harvard’s Michael Ignatieff in September 2003. “Bloodying American troops, forcing a precipitate withdrawal, destroying the chances for a democratic Iraq would inflict the biggest defeat on America since Vietnam and send a message to every Islamic extremist in the region: Goliath is vulnerable.”<sup>99</sup> A month earlier, in the wake of a terrorist attack on the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad, Harvard University terrorist expert Jessica Stern concluded that the United States “has taken a country that was not a terrorist threat and turned it into one.” How ironic it would be, she noted, that a war against Iraq initiated in the name of the global war on terrorism ended up creating “precisely the situation the administration has described as a breeding ground for terrorists: a state unable to control its borders or provide for its citizens’ rudimentary needs.”<sup>100</sup> Vincent Cannistraro, former CIA director of counterterrorism operations and analysis, believes that “we’ve created the conditions that have made Iraq the place to come to attack Americans.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, by the end of 2003, there was evidence of an al Qaeda decision to divert men and resources from its insurgent war against U.S. forces in Afghanistan into an expanded campaign against American and reconstruction targets in Iraq.<sup>102</sup>

Fifth, there is the matter of opportunity costs. All wars of choice entail opportunity costs. In the case of Iraq those costs have been substantial. Militarily, the invasion and its aftermath have severely taxed U.S. land power, especially the U.S. Army, including its reserve component forces.<sup>103</sup> Unexpected insurgent warfare, a scarcity of international troops, and the absence of readily available and reliable

Iraqi security forces have essentially left the United States holding the military manpower bag in Iraq under inherently manpower-intensive counterinsurgent circumstances. Obviously, U.S. forces in Iraq and their rotation base back in the United States are not readily available for other contingencies such as, for example, a war in Korea. Indeed, U.S. military preoccupation with Iraq restricts America’s freedom of military action elsewhere—likely a relief to North Korea, Iran, and other rogue states fearing preventive American military action. Whether U.S. ground forces, especially the Army, can sustain current commitments in Iraq and elsewhere overseas remains to be seen and has been a matter of considerable discussion within the defense community. Calls for increases in the size of the active-duty Army were countered by assurances that new technologies and force employment doctrine offer a substitute for a larger Army.<sup>104</sup> By late April 2004, however, it was clear that U.S. force deployments were inadequate to handle rising insurgent violence, which among other things prompted several coalition members to announce withdrawal of their troop contingents. Stateside rotation of selected deployed U.S. Army units was postponed and plans were drawn up to send fresh troops quickly to Iraq.<sup>105</sup>

Strategically, the greatest opportunity cost of Iraq may be the war on terrorism, especially its homeland security component. Critics of the decision to attack Iraq include Brent Scowcroft; former secretary of state Madeleine Albright; former CIA director Stansfield Turner; and former U.S. senator Gary Hart, who co-chaired the U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century. They argue that war with Iraq was a diversion from the war on terrorism because it was al Qaeda, not Iraq, that perpetrated the 9/11 attacks, and because the international opposition to a U.S. preventive war against Iraq threatens cooperation in defeating al Qaeda. They reject the administration’s threat conflation of al Qaeda and Iraq and believe that war against and reconstruction of the latter would consume resources and strategic attention better

focused against those who killed 3,000 Americans on 9/11.<sup>106</sup>

The administration has asserted that Saddam Hussein was “an ally of al Qaeda” and that the Iraqi dictator’s removal was “a crucial advance in the campaign against terrorism” and a “victory in the war on terror that began on September 11, 2001.”<sup>107</sup> If this were so, one would expect that the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime would have had an adverse effect on al Qaeda and al Qaeda-inspired terrorist organizations. In fact, the evidence to date, though admittedly incomplete, suggests that events in Iraq have had little if any negative effect on either Islamic terrorism in general or al Qaeda operations in particular. Al Qaeda and al Qaeda-inspired bombings continued in Iraq and spectacular mid-March 2004 bombings in Madrid (killing 200 people) brought to power a new Spanish government committed to withdrawing Spanish forces from Iraq. As a state sponsor of terrorism, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was always dwarfed by Iran, Syria, and Pakistan, and there was never an Iraqi analog to the mountains of Saudi money dedicated to funding the propagation of an extremist Wahhabi version of Islam.

Al Qaeda, though clearly damaged by the disruption of its Afghan base and the subsequent death or capture of leading operatives, continued to recruit manpower, and conduct and inspire post-Iraq War terrorist attacks on coalition- and reconstruction-linked and other targets in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq itself. Al Qaeda’s impressive regenerative powers, a function of the fact that it is as much a political movement as it is a terrorist organization, portends a counterterrorist war of years, even decades—quite the opposite of the three weeks it took U.S. military forces to topple Saddam Hussein. Indeed, in the wake of Saddam’s fall, the International Institute for Strategic Studies issued a report declaring that, notwithstanding the loss of its infrastructure in Afghanistan and perhaps one-third of its leadership, al Qaeda is “now reconstituted and doing business in a somewhat different manner, but more insidious

and just as dangerous as in its pre-September 11 incarnation” because the West’s “counterterrorism effort . . . perversely impelled an already highly decentralized and elusive transnational terrorist network to become even harder to identify and neutralize.”<sup>108</sup>

The long-term effect of Operation Iraqi Freedom on the nuclear behavior of other rogue states is also unclear. North Korea remains defiant and apparently determined to expand its nuclear weapons program. Iran has agreed to more intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, but those inspections might be insufficient to uncover a well-hidden program. Libya’s December 2003 revelation that it had an active nuclear weapons program seems to have been motivated largely by factors other than forcible regime change in Iraq, including program failure, a disastrous economy, and a longstanding desire to end Libya political and economic isolation.<sup>109</sup> Pakistan has confessed to an unprecedented record of nuclear proliferation, transferring over a 15-year period (1989–2003) nuclear technologies, equipment, and know-how to North Korea, Iran, and Libya. Pakistan’s complicity in what amounted to a nuclear arms bazaar was discovered almost by accident as a result of evidence from Libya following that country’s public decision to give up its WMD and permit U.S. and other foreign inspectors to verify that decision.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, the Iraq War demonstrates the inherent tendency of preventive war to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because if, as Richard Betts observes, “the rationale for preventive war is that conflict with the adversary is so deep and unremitting that war is inevitable, on worse terms than at present, as the enemy grows stronger over time,”<sup>111</sup> having that war now rather than later becomes irresistible. Never mind that few things in international politics are inevitable; because the United States believed that war with Iraq was inevitable, it became so.

These considerable political and military penalties of preventive war against Iraq might have been worth risking had Saddam

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Hussein posed a clear and present danger to the United States. As yet, however, there is no disclosed evidence that Saddam Hussein had reconstituted Iraq's nuclear weapons program, transferred or intended to transfer WMD to al Qaeda or any other terrorist organization, or even retained stocks of chemical munitions.

Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that Saddam Hussein was anything other than successfully deterred and contained during the 12 years separating the end of the Gulf War and the launching of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Unlike fanatical, shadowy terrorist organizations, which are relatively undeterrable if not undefeatable, Saddam Hussein—who always loved himself more than he hated the United States (even to the point, in contrast to his two sons, of meekly submitting to his own capture by U.S. forces)—ruled a state, and states contain such assets as territory, population, armed forces, and governmental and economic infrastructure that can be held hostage to unacceptable U.S. retaliation. Both Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden do hate America. But this shared hatred, noted the Naval Post Graduate School's Jeffrey Knopf before the Iraq War, "implies an assumption that all evil individuals will act alike, meaning the analogy creates an expectation that Saddam will act on his hatred for the United States in the same way that bin Laden did." On the contrary:

Saddam Hussein's position is very different. Saddam is the ruler of a state and has influence over others only by virtue of being a state leader. Territory is therefore essential to him. If he ceases to control Iraqi territory, he becomes nothing. Moreover, Saddam's primary goal is to maximize his personal power, with the secondary goal of creating a dynasty he can pass on to his sons. . . . The threat he poses is an old-fashioned kind: a lust for power so great it leads to an expansionist program for his states. Despite a very real animus toward the United States, he is not so fanatically devoted to any

abstract cause that he would sacrifice his grip on power or his own life to advance that cause.<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, neither Saddam Hussein nor any other rogue state regime has employed WMD against enemies capable of utterly devastating retaliation. They have threatened to use them against such enemies, just as the United States and the Soviet Union exchanged nuclear threats during the Cold War, but they have never used them. Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against helpless Kurds and Iranian infantry in the 1980s and threatened in 1990 to make Israel "eat fire" should Israel attack Iraq, but when war came in 1991 and he faced credible threats of nuclear retaliation, the Iraqi dictator refrained from employing his massive chemical weapons arsenal against coalition forces or Israel.

If Saddam Hussein was effectively deterred from using WMD against enemies capable of inflicting unacceptable retaliation, he was also most unlikely even to have contemplated transferring such weapons to organizations that were not so deterred. There is wide agreement on this point among those who have studied the Iraqi dictator. "The idea that Saddam Hussein would develop weapons of mass destruction and then give them to al Qaeda is staggeringly farfetched," contends W. Andrew Terrill, one of the U.S. Army's leading experts on Saddam. "Saddam remained in power for 20 years partially because of his unwillingness to trust even family members more than circumstances dictated. It would be completely out of character for him to trust an enemy like Osama bin Laden to take control of these weapons, and then implement Saddam's agenda in a way that leaves the Iraqi regime blameless."<sup>113</sup>

The conflation of rogue states and terrorist organizations—especially Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda—into an undifferentiated threat was a strategic error of the first order because it ignores critical differences between the two in character, political agendas, and vulnerability to U.S. military power, that is, susceptibility to deterrence via

credible threats of retaliation. Although few dispute the inherent difficulty of deterring terrorist attacks by suicidal fanatics, deterrence directed against the use of WMD so far appears to have worked against rogue states. Deterrence, when it works, is certainly cheaper than preventive war waged for rogue-state regime change.

### **Mini-Nukes**

The alternative of preventive military strikes aimed at destroying a rogue state's nascent nuclear weapons programs would consume less time and force than regime change. They would not entail assumption of the risks inherent in postattack occupation and reconstruction of the rogue state. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that an administration prepared to employ forcible regime change as a tool of counterproliferation is also interested in developing military technologies capable of "taking out" suspected nuclear weapons facilities. Those would have to include "bunker buster" weapons capable of penetrating and destroying subterranean facilities, because rogue states have learned that deep underground burial of their nuclear weapons facilities may be the best protection against preventive military strike.<sup>114</sup>

The technical question is whether bunker busters themselves would need to be nuclear weapons to achieve the desired effects on deep underground facilities. If so, then their use almost certainly would provoke much stronger international condemnation than that which has so isolated the United States on the issue of preventive war against Iraq. It would probably not matter a whit if the weapons employed were "mini-nukes" of low yield and employed in a fashion that minimized collateral damage. A terrible line would be crossed; not since 1945 has a nuclear weapon been detonated in war, and since then near universal opprobrium has helped prevent their use.

The administration has nonetheless displayed a keen interest in such weapons; indeed, an administration review of U.S. nuclear posture reportedly recommended

their development.<sup>115</sup> Both the effectiveness and wisdom of such weapons, however, have been strongly questioned.<sup>116</sup> Scientists are split on whether weapons can be developed that could do the job without excessive collateral damage. Opponents of mini-nukes fear that development and testing of a new category of nuclear weapons would undermine both the NPT regime and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which all nuclear powers (including the United States, which has not ratified the treaty) have observed since 1998. There are also fears that mini-nukes could blur the critical distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons.<sup>117</sup> Opponents such as Joseph Cirincione, former nuclear arms control negotiator and now director of the Carnegie Endowment's Non-Proliferation Project, also point out that their actual use "would cross a threshold that has not been breached since the Truman administration. That in turn would encourage other nations to develop and use nuclear weapons in a similar manner. That's not in the United States' national security interests."<sup>118</sup> Representative Jack Spratt (D-SC) warns that the United States cannot "continue to prevail on other countries not to develop nuclear weapons while we develop new tactical applications for such weapons and possibly resume testing."<sup>119</sup> Sam Nunn, former U.S. senator and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, believes that developing new nuclear weapons "is very damaging to America's security interests because . . . it sets back our efforts and our moral persuasion effectiveness to move the world away from nuclear weapons."<sup>120</sup> A Cato Institute analysis by Charles V. Peña concludes:

Ultimately, mini-nukes could undermine deterrence and make the United States less secure, especially when combined with a policy of preemptive regime change. If rogue states believe that the United States has a nuclear capability that it is willing to use preemptively, leaders of those countries may feel they have nothing to lose by striking first at

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the United States (knowing that waiting means certain defeat). If they possess WMD and are willing to give those weapons to terrorists—because being dead men walking reduces or removes all previous restraints to work with terrorists—then the United States will be vulnerable to potentially catastrophic attacks that can neither be deterred nor adequately defended against.<sup>121</sup>

There is also the possibility that preventive attacks on rogue state nuclear weapons facilities would not be conclusive, certainly in comparison to regime change. Bad intelligence could direct the strikes against the wrong or bogus targets. But even reliable intelligence might not be enough. The 1981 Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear complex at Osirak neither dissuaded nor prevented Iraq from continuing to pursue the development of nuclear weapons. On the contrary, the attack literally drove Iraq's program underground and increased Saddam Hussein's determination to become a nuclear weapons state. The Osirak attack also convinced the Iranians to disperse and bury much of their nuclear program. So even a successful preventative attack that eliminates a short-term threat would not necessarily prevent that threat from emerging over the longer-term. Indeed, it might even create a more urgent motivation for the threat to materialize.

Finally, there is the unavoidable and overriding political question: Would any American president actually launch a nuclear attack on a nonnuclear state with which it was not at war?

## **Deterrence Reconsidered**

The nuclear nonproliferation regime and the U.S. extension of deterrence to potential nuclear weapons states have unquestionably retarded the proliferation of nuclear weapons. But the regime's safeguards were not designed to stop determined states from cheating. "The underlying assumption," observes former UNSCOM chief inspector David Kay, "was

that if a state desired to pursue nuclear weapons ambitions by other means—a parallel clandestine program, for example—it would either not sign the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), or its activities would be detected by national intelligence systems of other states."<sup>122</sup> The inadequacies of the NPT regime were dramatically exposed by the post-Gulf War I discovery of the surprising scope and status of Iraq's secret nuclear weapons program, which in turn prompted the United States to embrace counterproliferation. Counterproliferation is a necessary complement to nonproliferation—in any war with a rogue state armed with or seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, the United States must be prepared, depending on the circumstances at hand, to preempt their use and destroy their supporting facilities with counterforce attacks. Carolyn James at Iowa State University of Science and Technology observes that counterproliferation "recognizes that nonproliferation has failed to halt the spread of nuclear technology and equipment," and seeks "to augment nonproliferation by adding protection from nuclear armed adversaries."<sup>123</sup>

The real issue, however, is whether the United States should *initiate* wars against rogue states to prevent their acquisition of nuclear weapons. The United States did so against Iraq and has declared a use-of-force doctrine that includes preventive war as a means of counterproliferation that in turn serves the stated goal of perpetual global military primacy.

Military primacy is of course a necessary prerequisite for preventive war. For the United States, however, preventive war can rarely if ever be a more attractive policy choice than deterrence—unless one has completely lost confidence in deterrence. Yet that seems to be just what has happened. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 persuaded the Bush administration that nuclear deterrence was of little use against fanatical nonstate terrorist organizations and insufficient to prevent rogue states from using WMD, including nuclear weapons, against the United States. The view is that such weapons are, for both

terrorist organizations and rogue states, weapons of first choice rather than last resort, and therefore that anticipatory U.S. military action is the safest policy response.

While there is general agreement that a suicidal enemy is exceptionally difficult (if not impossible) to deter or dissuade, rogue state regimes have displayed an overriding determination to survive and therefore to accommodate the realities of power. They may in fact seek nuclear weapons for the same basic reason that other states have: to enhance their security (as of course they themselves define it). A. F. Mullins at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory asks:

Why do countries seek to acquire nuclear weapons? Not for reasons markedly different from those that drive them to seek conventional weapons: to defend against or to deter attack; to compel submission or perhaps to carry out an attack; or to play a self-defined role in the international system (i.e., to gain status or prestige, either in the context of an alliance or in regional or global politics).<sup>124</sup>

The assumption that rogue states seek nuclear weapons solely for offensive purposes (coercion, blackmail, attack) serves the argument for preventive war against them, but it ignores the deterrent/defensive functions those weapons also perform, as well as the record of rogue state non-use of WMD against hated enemies capable of inflicting unacceptable retaliation. That record demonstrates that deterrence has worked. In the case of Iraq, Iran, and other Gulf states, nuclear weapons acquisition motives include deterrence of another regional power (a powerful motive for blood enemies Iraq and Iran vis-à-vis each other), strategic equality with Israel, and deterrence of intervention by outside powers, especially (in the post-Soviet era) the United States. It is eminently plausible, as Mullins observes, that “a Gulf state might believe that, by obtaining a nuclear capability that could put at risk the forces deployed for

intervention by outside powers or that could put at risk the cities of any regional state providing bases for these forces, it could deter an intervention.”<sup>125</sup> Anthony Blinken at the Center for Strategic and International Studies contends that “Putting military preemption at the heart of national security policy signals America’s enemies that their only insurance policy against regime change is to acquire WMD as quickly as possible, precipitating the very danger Washington seeks to prevent.”<sup>126</sup>

Indeed, the underlying objective of preventive war as a means of counterproliferation may well be *to prevent rogue states from deterring the United States*. This objective certainly supports the declared goal of perpetuating U.S. global military primacy; the president has stated that rogue states seek nuclear weapons “to attempt . . . to prevent us from deterring [their] aggressive behavior.”<sup>127</sup> Rogue state possession of nuclear weapons is thus seen as a threat not so much to the United States itself but rather to the *U.S. freedom of military action necessary to sustain U.S. global military primacy*. (Not surprisingly, missile defenses—which are a significant component of the administration’s defense policy—are also seen to enhance U.S. freedom of action by denying rogue states the ability to hold U.S. cities hostage and thereby deter U.S. use of force against rogue states.)<sup>128</sup>

International relations theorist Robert L. Jervis at Columbia University, writing on the eve of the Iraq War, concluded that “it is clearly a mistake to jump from the fact that Saddam is evil to the conclusion that his possession of WMD threatens the United States and world peace,” and then asked the following two questions: “Would Saddam’s nuclear weapons give him greater influence in the region, especially in the face of resistance by a much more powerful United States? Could these weapons do anything other than deter an unprovoked attack on him?”<sup>129</sup> Jervis concluded that, “Absent an American attack, the U.S. should be able to protect itself by the combination of the credibility of its threat to retaliate and Saddam’s relatively low motivation to strike.”<sup>130</sup> Of course, the United States

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did attack Iraq in 2003, but Saddam Hussein had no nuclear weapons, or even, it seems, chemical weapons, to fire or not to fire, thus leaving a critical question unanswered. We do know, however, that he withheld use of his ample stocks of chemical munitions against Israel and coalition forces in the Gulf War under clear threat of nuclear retaliation.

For the United States, whose nuclear capabilities are not in doubt, credibility—an evident willingness to use those capabilities as threatened—has always been the challenge of effective deterrence, and credible deterrence can be difficult to maintain even against the most rational of adversaries. “American theory and practice of deterrence,” argues Colin Gray, “is prone to commit the cardinal error of confusing rationality with reasonableness.” He continues, perhaps with pre-Iraq War administration characterizations of Saddam Hussein and other rogue-state leaders as “mad” and “unbalanced” in mind:

A recurring theme in U.S. public discourse is that of the rationality or irrationality of a particular foreign leadership. While genuinely irrational leaders do exist from time to time, meaning people who cannot connect means purposefully with ends, their occurrence is so rare and their longevity in power is so brief, that they can be ignored. The problem is not the irrational adversary, instead it is the perfectly rational foe who seeks purposefully, and rationally, to achieve goals that appear wholly unreasonable to us. American strategic thinkers have long favored the fallacy that Rational Strategic Persons must think alike.<sup>131</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The challenges of sustaining credible deterrence must be judged against the risks and penalties of preventive war, which have been on display ever since the United States convinced itself that a horrific Iraqi assault

on the United States or U.S. interests overseas was inevitable and acted accordingly. Again, according to Gray:

[The United States] has no practical choice other than to make of deterrence all that it can be, albeit in some seemingly unpromising situations. If this view is rejected, the grim implication is that the United States, as sheriff of the world order, will require heroic performance from those policy instruments charged with cutting-edge duties on behalf of preemptive or preventive military operations. Preemption or prevention have their obvious attractions as contrasted with deterrence, at least when they work. But they carry the risk of encouraging a hopeless quest for total security. In order for it to be sensible to regard preemption as an occasional stratagem, rather than as the operational concept of choice, it is essential that the United States wring whatever effectiveness it can out of a strategy of deterrence.<sup>132</sup>

Interestingly, Condoleezza Rice, just a year before she became National Security Advisor, voiced confidence in deterrence as the best means of dealing with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and other rogue states. In January 2000 she published an article in *Foreign Affairs* in which she declared “the first line of defense should be a clear and classical statement of deterrence—if they do acquire WMD, their weapons will be unusable because to use them would bring national obliteration.” She added that rogue states “were living on borrowed time” and that “there should be no sense of panic about them.”<sup>133</sup>

But panic there was in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the administration’s demotion of deterrence was a product of that panic. Unfortunately, the combination of disparaged nuclear deterrence and manifest obsession with rogue state acquisition of nuclear weapons may actually diminish U.S. security by further encouraging rogue states



to go nuclear. Administration statements and actions magnify the attractiveness of nuclear weapons to rogue states and suggest an easily deterrable United States. America “is raising the political and strategic value of proliferation of WMD,” argues Gray. “If the world was in any doubt as to the importance of WMD, U.S. policy has resolved that uncertainty. . . . American officials need to try to avoid feeding the foreign perception that the most reliable way to ensure nonintervention in regional affairs by the United States is to become a nuclear weapons state.”<sup>134</sup> On the other hand, a credible threat of regime change à la Operation Iraqi Freedom could persuade some rogue state regimes that the better security option lies in remaining a nonnuclear weapons state. Much has been made of Colonel Moammar Gaddafi’s acknowledgment of Libya’s programs to develop nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and invitation to the International Atomic Energy Agency, CIA, and other organizations to administer and verify the elimination of Libya’s WMD. Though driven by a variety of motives, common sense would suggest that at least the timing of his decision was influenced by events in Iraq.<sup>135</sup>

Belittling nuclear deterrence not only encourages selection of the far more problematic and dangerous alternative of preventive war but also does an injustice to the continuing potency of nuclear deterrence, especially against nascent nuclear rogue states. A handful of primitive atomic weapons does not purchase, nor should it be allowed to purchase, immunity from thermonuclear Armageddon. It is hard to disagree with Jeffrey Knopf’s conclusion:

Those who seek to write epitaphs for deterrence and containment do so prematurely. Analysis of the relevant logic and evidence shows that rogue states are not necessarily beyond the reach of deterrence, even in a world where they might be tempted to use terrorist networks to conduct a sneak attack. Those who sweepingly dismiss deterrence and

containment as relics of the 20th century thus do a disservice to U.S. national security. They make it less likely that the United States would consider using these tools when they might be effective, even though these tools might help the country avoid some of the costs and risks associated with war. . . . However much the world has changed [since 9/11], the requirements for making sound policy decisions have not. Inferences drawn from a single past event cannot substitute for proper policy analysis—no matter how recent and traumatic the event, and no matter how compelling the lessons of that event feel in its aftermath.<sup>136</sup>

The reality is that the long-term national security of the United States is far better served by a policy that concentrates on deterring the use of nuclear weapons by rogue states than by a policy that concentrates on preventing, by force if necessary, their acquisition. Preventive war is no solution. It cannot perpetuate U.S. military primacy indefinitely, nor can it stop every foreign state that wants them from obtaining nuclear weapons.

## Notes

1. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (September 2002), p. 1. Hereinafter *National Security Strategy*.
2. *Ibid.*, p. iii.
3. See William C. Martel, “Proliferation and Pragmatism: Nonproliferation Policy for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Deterrence and Nuclear Proliferation in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Stephen J. Cimbala (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), pp. 103–18.
4. Richard K. Betts, “Suicide from Fear of Death?” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2003), p. 40.
5. Richard K. Betts, “Striking First: A History of Thankfully Lost Opportunities,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 17, no.1 (Spring 2003): 22.
6. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 13. For a superb exposition of deterrence theory,

**Preventive war cannot perpetuate U.S. military primacy indefinitely, nor can it stop every foreign state that wants them from obtaining nuclear weapons.**

- see Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961). For one of the best assessments of U.S. reliance on deterrence during the Cold War, see Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
7. Colin S. Gray, "Deterrence and the Nature of Strategy," in *Deterrence in the 21st Century*, ed. Max G. Manwaring (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 18.
  8. Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* (January 1959), p. 213.
  9. Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 52-53.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Keith B. Payne questions both assumptions in *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).
  12. Keith B. Payne and C. Dale Walton, "Deterrence in the Post-Cold War World," in *Strategy in the Contemporary World, An Introduction to Strategic Studies*, ed. John Baylis, James Wirtz, Eliot Cohen, and Colin S. Gray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 169.
  13. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 608.
  14. John Mueller argues that the absence of great power warfare since 1945 has little to do with nuclear deterrence and everything to do with a growing recognition, bolstered by the experience of two world wars, of war's futility and obnoxiousness. See his *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
  15. Barry R. Posen, "U.S. Security Policy in a Nuclear-Armed World, or: What If Iraq Had Had Nuclear Weapons?" *Security Studies* (Spring 1997), p. 4.
  16. See *ibid.*, pp. 18-21; Mark Gaffney, "Will the Next Mid East War Go Nuclear?" in *The Saddam Hussein Reader, Selections of Leading Writers on Iraq*, ed. Turi Munthe (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002); Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 448-51; and W. Andrew Terrill, "Chemical Warfare and 'Desert Storm': The Disaster that Never Came," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (Autumn 1993), pp. 263-79.
  17. Colin S. Gray, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* (Carlisle Barracks, PA; Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 2003), p. 13.
  18. Payne and Walton, p. 172.
  19. In April 1995 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam announced that Communist losses during the "American period" of the Vietnam War (1954-73) totaled 1,100,000 dead, a figure that presumably included 300,000 missing in action. (Hanoi also estimated 2,000,000 civilian dead.) The military dead represent 5 percent of the Communist population base during the Vietnam War of 20,000,000 (16,000,000 in North Vietnam and 4,000,000 in those areas of South Vietnam effectively controlled by the Communists). No other major belligerent in the 20th century sustained such a high military death toll proportional to its population. A 5 percent loss of today's U.S. population of almost 300,000,000 would equal about 15,000,000 dead. See *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 453; Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), pp. 36-37; and John E. Mueller, "The Search for the 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam: The Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel," *International Studies Quarterly* (December 1980), pp. 507-11.
  20. See James E. Doyle and Peter Engstrom, "The Utility of Nuclear Weapons: Tradeoffs and Opportunity Costs," in "Pulling Back from the Nuclear Brink: Reducing and Countering Nuclear Threats," ed. Barry R. Schneider and William L. Dowdy (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 39-59; and George Perkovich, "Bush's Nuclear Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2003), pp. 2-3.
  21. Michael P. Tkacik, *The Future of U.S. Nuclear Operational Doctrine: Balancing Safety and Deterrence in an Anarchic World* (Lampeter, U.K.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 72.
  22. Barry R. Schneider, *Future War and Counterproliferation: U.S. Military to NBC Threats* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), p. 45.
  23. Barry Schneider, "Military Responses to Proliferation Threats," in Schneider and Dowdy, p. 306.
  24. William J. Perry, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington: Department of Defense, 1995), p. 73. Emphasis in original. For an informative outline and assessment of the Clinton administration's counterproliferation policy, see Barry R. Schneider, *Future War and Counterproliferation, U.S. Military Responses to NBC Proliferation Threats* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), pp. 45-62.

25. James J. Wirtz, "Counterproliferation, Conventional Counterforce and Nuclear War," in *Preventing the Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, ed. Eric Herring (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 6, 9.
26. See *ibid.*, pp. 162–64.
27. Robert S. Litwak, "Non-proliferation and the Dilemmas of Regime Change," *Survival* (Winter 2003–04), p. 7.
28. See for example, The White House, "President Bush Addresses the Nation in Prime Time Press Conference," press release, April 13, 2004, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040413-20.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040413-20.html).
29. The most extensive compilation of George W. Bush's public speeches and informal remarks on 9/11, the war on terrorism, and U.S. policy regarding WMD is the *National Journal's* "We Will Prevail": *President George W. Bush on War, Terrorism, and Freedom* (New York: Continuum Press, 2003), which covers presidential statements from September 11, 2001, through May 26, 2003.
30. *National Security Strategy*, p. 1.
31. *Ibid.*, p. iii.
32. "We Will Prevail," p. 161.
33. *National Security Strategy*, p. 30.
34. "We Will Prevail," p. 159.
35. Donald Rumsfeld, "The Price of Inaction Can Be Truly Catastrophic," *Asahi Shimbun* (Japan), September 10, 2002, <http://ebird.dtic.mil/Sep2002/e20020910price.htm>.
36. *National Security Strategy*, p. 14.
37. "We Will Prevail," p. 216.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
39. Quoted in Kevin Whitelaw and Mark Mazzetti, "Why War?" *U.S. News and World Report*, October 14, 2002, <http://ebird.dtic.mil/Oct2002/e20021007whywar.htm>. Emphasis added.
40. Quoted in Derrick Z. Jackson, "Still No Mass Weapons, No Ties to 9/11, No Truth," *Boston Globe*, December 17, 2003.
41. "We Will Prevail," pp. 159–60.
42. *National Security Strategy*, p. 15.
43. "We Will Prevail," p. 108.
44. *National Security Strategy*, p. 15.
45. Quoted in Scott Peterson, "Can Hussein Be Deterred?" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 10, 2002.
46. "We Will Prevail," p. 196.
47. The White House, *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction* (December 2002), p. 1.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
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