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Strategic Insight

Preventive War against Iraq

by [James A. Russell](#) and [James J. Wirtz](#)

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November 4, 2002

With the clouds of war gathering over Iraq, several long standing guides to U.S. defense policy, especially about when to go to war, have become the first casualties in the effort to end the threat posed by the regime in Baghdad. For nearly sixty years, U.S. officials have relied on the concept of deterrence as the cornerstone of U.S. defense policy. The nation went to war when it had either been attacked (Pearl Harbor) or when its "vital interests" were at stake (Korea, the Gulf War). Indeed, many believe that when it deviated from this practice in places like Vietnam, the results were disastrous. Today, however, a new guide to action is emerging. With Iraq as the target, the Bush administration is poised to use force to head off dire threats before they emerge fully by using *preventive war* as a tool to manage an increasingly chaotic international environment.

Preventive motivation for war is based on the belief that war with a particular adversary is inevitable. Once conflict is viewed as inevitable, policymakers must make one of the most difficult and horrific diplomatic decisions in international relations. They have to make military and political judgments about the level of risk the nation is prepared to accept and decide whether it is better to fight now while the costs are relatively low, or wait and possibly confront a more dangerous adversary. In the past, circumstances mercifully discouraged the emergence of preventive motivations for war, although the idea was raised in the late 1940s as a way to deal with the Soviets. For most of the Cold War, the United States lacked the capability to defeat the Soviet Union at an "acceptable cost," and instead banked on deterrence (and the related policy of containment) to create a situation that would lead to the mellowing of Soviet power. But today, the proliferation of small chemical, biological or even nuclear arsenals creates a preventive motivation for war. U.S. policymakers were forced to learn to live in a world in which the Soviet Union was armed with nuclear weapons; but Iraq is no Soviet Union. It is possible to eliminate the threat posed by Iraq through military action.

Although critics charge that talk of war against Iraq is some sort of partisan political ploy to hide failure in the war on terrorism, dominate the political agenda, or spread U.S. imperialism, several developments have made preventive motivation for war a tangible force in U.S. foreign policy and world politics.

9/11

It is impossible to overstate the psychological impact of the 9/11 attacks on policymakers, especially as they consider preventive war. For those responsible for U.S. national defense, watching fanatics alter the New York City skyline created a lasting impression that war is indeed a real possibility and that America's enemies will stop at nothing to attack the United States, its forces overseas and its allies and friends. Elected officials in both political parties also are aware that the American public has been relatively forgiving by not looking for scapegoats, despite evidence that warning signs of al-Qaeda's diabolical intentions were ignored, caught up in bureaucratic red-tape, or subsumed by background clutter. The attacks themselves have not yet created significant adverse political fallout for the Bush or Clinton administrations, although there is no telling how forgiving the American public might be next time. Clearly,

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the Bush administration is committed to not being surprised again, and given Saddam Hussein's track record it would in fact be difficult to explain what happened if Iraq catches the administration napping.

Saddam Hussein: Inclination, Capability and Opportunity?

Three facts, which are not disputed by either critics or supporters of the Bush administration, make Saddam Hussein and his regime a plausible target of preventive war. First, Hussein is committed to retaining his existing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and to developing a variety of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. He has sought to marry these weapons with delivery systems capable of hitting targets hundreds of miles away. The Iraqis have violated the terms that ended the 1991 Gulf War, which mandated eliminating Iraq's WMD capability. Iraq is in violation of at least 16 United Nations Security Council resolutions that, among other things, call for Baghdad to surrender all its weapons of mass destruction and associated research and production equipment. Iraq has suffered nearly a decade of U.N. imposed sanctions and intermittent U.S. air attack rather than comply with international law. Saddam could make the issue of preventive war go away if he simply complied with U.N. resolutions and abandoned his quest to retain and develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. The fact that he is willing to face war rather than comply with international law demonstrates his commitment to retain this arsenal.

Second, Saddam has a history of aggressive behavior and has shown a willingness to use his WMD against internal and external adversaries. In the last 25 years, Saddam has initiated two major regional wars resulting in the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million people. In addition to using chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam used the weapons on his own people in the March 1988 attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja.



These pictures are said to have been taken in the aftermath of Saddam's attack using chemical weapons and cluster bombs on the Kurdish city of Halabja (population estimated at 70,000) on March 17, 1988. Halabja is located about 150 miles northeast of Baghdad and 8-10 miles from the Iranian border. The attack, said to have involved mustard gas, nerve agent and possibly cyanide, killed an estimated 5,000 of the town's inhabitants. The attack on Halabja took place amidst the infamous al-Anfal campaign, in which Saddam brutally repressed yet another of the Kurdish revolts during the Iran-Iraq war. Saddam is also said to have used chemical weapons in attacking up to 24 villages in Kurdish areas in April 1987.

Third, Saddam has generally tormented his entire population. He and his regime have failed to conduct themselves within acceptable norms of international behavior. According to Douglas Porch, "Saddam Hussein is thoroughly nasty. His police and intelligence services, operating on tips from legions of informers, starve babies within sight of the agonizing mothers, gouge out the eyes of children before their parents, offer a male 'suspect' the spectacle of the repeated rape of his wife and daughters, or slowly immerse a victim in a vat of acid, all to force a 'confession'. An estimated 200,000 Iraqis have disappeared into Saddam's prisons during his 20 years in power, a proportion of the population that would number 2.5 million if such barbarity were applied in the United States." [\[1\]](#)

In Iraq, the United States is presented with the quintessential "rogue" regime. The regime in Baghdad possesses and uses WMD, acts aggressively when opportunity arises, torments its own people, and demonstrates continuously a general hostility towards the United States and its interests. If Iraq launched an attack against one of its neighbors, declared the existence of its nuclear capability, or colluded with terrorists to attack the United States, no one could say that these events came as a surprise.

Conclusions: Implications for International Security

Whether preventive war is justified in the case of Iraq should and will continue to be debated, but the emergence of tangible preventive motivation for war creates serious implications for the United States and the international community:

- How uniformly can the assumptions of preventive war be applied given the situational variables that are bound to change with each particular adversary? Critics will charge that a decision to fight a preventive war against Iraq means that the United States can use the same basic rationale to make war on the other so-called rogue states—Iran and North Korea.
- If the adoption of this doctrine signals a greater willingness to use force by the world's preeminent global power, how will this shape the overall tenor of international relations? Will it signal a new respect for international law, or just a growing reliance on the use of force in world politics?
- Does deterrence have any role at all under the theory of preventative war? And what is the role of nuclear weapons if they are not judged to deter adversaries as they did in the past?

These are but a few of the issues that strategic planners will have to address as they contemplate how to respond to the new threat environment.

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References

1. Douglas Porch, "The Threatening Story," *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2002, p. BW03