

Unilateral Preventive War: Illegitimate And Immoral

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

21 August 2002

Los Angeles Times

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a distinguished historian, was an advisor to President John F. Kennedy.

One of the astonishing events of recent months is the presentation of preventive war as a legitimate and moral instrument of U.S. foreign policy. This has not always been the case. Dec. 7, 1941, on which day the Japanese launched a preventive strike against the U.S. Navy, has gone down in history as a date that will live in infamy. During the Cold War, advocates of preventive war were dismissed as a crowd of loonies. When Robert Kennedy called the notion of a preventive attack on the Cuban missile bases "Pearl Harbor in reverse," and added, "For 175 years we have not been that kind of country," he swung the ExCom -- President Kennedy's special group of advisors -- from an airstrike to a blockade.

The policy of containment plus deterrence won the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, everyone thanked heaven that the preventive-war loonies had never got into power in any major country.

Today, alas, they appear to be in power in the United States. Rebaptizing preventive war as preemptive war doesn't change its character. Preventive war is based on the proposition that it is possible to foretell with certainty what is to come.

The Bush administration hawks just know, if we do not act today, that something horrible will happen to us tomorrow. Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld evidently see themselves as Steven Spielberg's "precogs" in "Minority Report," who are psychically equipped to avert crimes that are about to be committed.

Certainty about prediction is an illusion. One thing that history keeps teaching us is that the future is full of surprises and outwits all our certitudes.

Consider the instant case: Iraq. The policy of containment plus deterrence has kept Saddam Hussein behind his own frontiers for the last decade.

What is it that our Pentagon precogs know he is plotting to do? What is the clear and present danger, the direct and immediate threat, to justify sending the Army into Iraq?

Do the administration's precogs expect that he will use his mass-destruction arsenal against Kuwait? Against Israel? Against the United States?

Since Hussein is not interested in suicide, he is unlikely to do any of these things. Aggression would play into American hands. By using his weaponry, Hussein would give the U.S. president his heart's desire: a reason the world would accept for invading Iraq and enforcing "regime change."

The one contingency that would very probably lead Hussein to resort to his ghastly weapons would be just this invasion of Iraq by the United States.

Meanwhile, the containment policy seems to be working. If it doesn't work, war is always an option. And Hussein, after all, is mortal. He is sure to be gone one of these days. What is so vital about getting rid of him next week or next month?

The possibilities of history are far richer and more various than the human mind is likely to conceive -- and the arrogance of leaders who are sure they can predict the future invites retribution.

"The hardest strokes of heaven," the English historian Sir Herbert Butterfield has written, "fall in history upon those who imagine that they can control things in a sovereign manner, playing providence not only for themselves but for the far future -- reaching out into the future with the wrong kind of farsightedness, and gambling on a lot of risky calculations in which there must never be a single mistake."

Unilateral preventive war is neither legitimate nor moral. It is illegitimate and immoral. For more than 200 years we have not been that kind of country.

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