

Mutual Deterrence and Pre-emptive War

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(from his Inaugural Lecture as Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr. Chair, LBJ School of Public Affairs
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I want to discuss an aspect of Lyndon Johnson's legacy that I have come to know well. For most people it is less well known, and less accurately recollected, than either the Great Society or the Vietnam War. But it is not less important. This concerns the strategic balance and our country's approach to the preservation of the nuclear peace.

What many people - both at the time and forty years later - do not appreciate is that when John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson took office in 1961, deterrence and containment were not the cornerstones of US nuclear policy so far as the territory of the United States itself was concerned.

Deterrence and Mutual Assured Destruction could not have been the foundations of policy at that time, for the simple reason that the Soviet Union lacked the means to deliver its nuclear warheads onto the United States - neither by submarine, nor by rocket, nor reliably from the air. There was of course a Soviet threat to Europe, which was credibly deterred, and a specific threat to Berlin, which was eventually contained. But as far as the United States was concerned - no. We were not credibly deterred. We could have destroyed the USSR and not have been destroyed in return.

Instead the United States at that time had a policy of massive retaliation - the Single Integrated Operating Plan - whose terms required overwhelming response to an outbreak of conflict. This was dangerously rigid, as was known at the time. But there were plans in development for something far worse. As documents declassified from the LBJ Presidential Library prove, there were plans to launch on pretext, once a sufficient stock of first-strike weapons existed. In July of 1961 this was projected to be the case by the end of 1963.

It was the great genius of President Kennedy and then of President Johnson, in my judgment, to ensure that these plans were never put into effect. The story of the Cuban missile crisis and the specific resistance of JFK and LBJ to dangerous advice then is now well known. But a greater part of their genius lay in the doctrine of mutual deterrence, which they laid down well before the conditions under which the United States was technically deterred from attacking the Soviet Union existed in practice. In this way, by asserting as mutual what was in fact only unilateral at that time - the Soviets were deterred by us but we were not effectively deterred by them - Kennedy and Johnson preserved the peace until a genuine strategic balance finally arrived - which occurred around 1967 as I understand it. Given the political risks, this was statecraft of a high order.

It is an incidental fact that economists played an important role in developing these understandings - notably Thomas Schelling, Carl Kaysen, and Walt Rostow. It is to this period and this problem that we owe, in some part, the development and larger acceptance of the theory of games.

But the real relevance of this story is to our present situation. The President and Vice President, Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney, have now promulgated a new strategic doctrine. It is a doctrine that explicitly rejects deterrence, and also containment. It is a doctrine that purports to respond to the conditions of threat we obviously face. But in fact it returns us to the dangerous strategic underworld of Curtis LeMay and Thomas Power - not to mention George C. Scott and Dr. Strangelove.

Mr. Cheney's speech of August 26th summarized his case:

In the days of the Cold War, we were able to manage the threat with strategies of deterrence and containment. But it's a lot tougher to deter enemies who have no country to defend. And containment is not possible when dictators obtain weapons of mass destruction, and are prepared to share them with terrorists who intend to inflict catastrophic casualties on the United States.

Now, some of what Mr. Cheney says is plainly true. Al Qaeda cannot be deterred, nor can it be safely contained. But then, the rejection of these doctrines in favor of pre-emptive self-defense is unnecessary to justify action against Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda has already attacked us, numerous times. We are clearly justified in pursuing them to the end.

The more difficult question is whether the new doctrine is needed for Iraq. And again the answer is no. Saddam Hussein does have a country and a regime to defend. He was deterred effectively from the use of chemical weapons against Israel in 1991. He is contained - by all evidence - within (a fraction of) his own country today. And he is subject to the enforcement power of the Security Council, with respect to his disarmament commitments, as Mr. Bush correctly argued to the UN on September 12. However, proceeding on that ground requires that we also accept the judgment of the Security Council as to what specific enforcement actions are justified at this moment.

And so it would appear that the doctrine of pre-emptive self-defense has been resurrected now for one reason only - to defy the authority of the Security Council and the UN Charter, to justify a war on Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq on terms, conditions and timetables dictated by us.

It may be that this war is justifiable on numerous grounds - including the brutality of the Iraqi government, its past genocides, and the desire of the Iraqi people to be liberated from a vicious tyrant.

But it also may be that large risks inhere in such a course of action. There are risks to the Iraqi civilian population, both from our bombs and from Saddam's chemical and biological agents. There are risks to US soldiers if, contrary to expectation, Iraqi forces stand and fight. There are risks to civilians throughout the West and in Israel if Saddam Hussein empties his chemical and biological armories into the hands of terrorist networks - as a parting gift on the way out. These risks exist. I cannot assess them. I only wish I had more confidence that our leaders were assessing them prudently and correctly.

But the matter of strategic doctrine is something anyone can judge. Let me therefore keep attention on that question, which is more enduring, if less immediately pressing.

A simple economic point may be made. In a world of sovereign nations, a strategic doctrine, if it is to be valid, if it is to promote peace and stability, must be reciprocal. It cannot be unilateral. It cannot apply to one side but not the other. The rules of a fair game must be independent of the identity of the players.

Deterrence and containment meet this test. It is possible to be mutually deterred, mutually contained. It is possible for both sides in a conflict to accept this condition, because it confers a decisive advantage on neither one.

The doctrine of pre-emptive self-defense, which is the right of one country to attack an adversary based on a subjective evaluation of capability and intent, fails this test. We, in the United States, cannot admit that it imparts an equal right to Iraq. Iraq clearly faces an imminent threat from a determined and capable adversary, the United States. We make no secret of this fact. Does President Bush concede to Saddam Hussein the right to detonate an atomic bomb - if he had one - in the Metro station at the Pentagon? And if Mr. Cheney were to observe this

outcome tomorrow, from his secure and undisclosed location, on what grounds, given the views he has stated, could he legitimately object?

It seems clear enough that neither Mr. Bush nor Mr. Cheney, nor their advisers, are thinking this through. Are they conceding to India the same right to strike Pakistan that they claim for themselves? Are they conceding a parallel right to Pakistan? I doubt that they are. But the Indians and Pakistanis will no doubt see matters from quite another point of view.

Put another way, the doctrine of pre-emptive self-defense appears logically to imply another, subsidiary doctrine - that of a Chosen People. It is a view that presupposes a nation ordained by some higher power to make judgments for the world. This is a doctrine adhered to only by theocratic states, who have rights not granted by God to the infidel.

It is a doctrine, I submit, deeply at odds with the principles of economics; it does not lead to fair games, stable equilibria, or the avoidance of worst cases. As an economist, I have to object.

It is, more seriously, a doctrine at odds with the founding principles of the United States, which hold that all men are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life. . . . As an American, I have to object to it.

And as a person who merely wants to live in a world of reasonable equality, justice, security and peace, I have to consider whether this doctrine promotes those goals. Since it does not, I have to object - on the ground of the simple humanity that we share.

A year ago, I stood in a hall in this building and urged my friends, many of them deeply rooted in the peace movement and no more suspicious of the present administration than I, to support our action of justified self-defense in Afghanistan. I believed then, and do now, that what we did there was not flawless, but it was right. Today, without illusions as to the character of the Iraqi regime, I cannot do the same. I cannot endorse the strategic doctrine now leading us toward a pre-emptive war. In my view, such an action contradicts those basic principles of our country - constitutional and republican - that have made her worth defending for two hundred years.

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