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Bill of Rights in Action 19:3

The Bush Doctrine

The Iraq War may only be the beginning of an ambitious American strategy to confront dangerous regimes and expand democracy in the world.

Following World War II, the United States helped set up international institutions to provide for world security and stability. The [United Nations](#), the [World Bank](#), and [International Monetary Fund](#) were started. The United States formed alliances—the most important one was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ([NATO](#))—to stop communism. It gave Europe billions of dollars in aid to rebuild. It developed a new policy to check the spread of communism by the Russians and others. The chief author of this policy, diplomat [George F. Kennan](#), called for "firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies." The policy was announced by President Harry S. Truman in 1947. It became known as the [Truman Doctrine](#).

Truman's policy of containment came under attack by [John Foster Dulles](#), who became President Dwight D. Eisenhower's secretary of state. In the 1952 campaign, Dulles called for "rollback" and "liberation" of the Soviet empire instead of containment. Once in power, however, the Eisenhower administration and all subsequent administrations during the Cold War followed the [policy of containment](#). This policy relied on deterrence to prevent a Soviet attack. The Soviet government was told that an attack on any NATO member state was an attack on all the member states. The United States and NATO would have responded to an attack with massive retaliation. This threat deterred the Soviet Union from attacking. And the Soviet threat of massive retaliation deterred the United States from intervening in the Soviet bloc.

The [Cold War](#) ended with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the 1990s, the rapid spread of democracy and capitalism in the world seemed to herald a new era of peace and stability. The United States emerged as the most powerful nation in the world. Its economy is far stronger than any other country's. It almost spends more on its military than all the other nations of the world combined. The attacks on September 11, 2001, however, proved that even powerful nations like the United States were vulnerable to terrorist acts.

After the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush brought forward a new American security strategy to prevent terrorists and dangerous regimes from developing, acquiring, or using weapons of mass destruction. The new strategy, called the Bush Doctrine, also pushed for the expansion of democracy in Middle East Muslim countries and elsewhere in the world.

Background of the Bush Doctrine

Near the end of the Cold War, Iraq (led by dictator [Saddam Hussein](#)) invaded its oil-rich neighbor Kuwait. The U.N. Security Council authorized the use of force against Iraq unless it withdrew its forces from Kuwait by January 15, 1991. The United States organized a coalition made up of its NATO allies and other nations including several Arab countries. On January 16, the coalition, led mainly by American troops, started pushing Iraq out of Kuwait. When the Gulf War ended, President George H. W. Bush (the father of the current president) decided to contain Iraq's potential military threat. He did this by stationing American military forces in neighboring countries. The U.N. Security Council issued resolutions calling for Iraq to disarm by ridding itself of weapons of mass destruction, and it sent weapons inspectors into Iraq.

In 1992, Department of Defense officials Paul Wolfowitz and Lewis Libby wrote a [proposal](#) for a new American military and political strategy. They concluded that containment and deterrence had become obsolete with the end of the Cold War. They also argued for three revolutionary ideas:

- The United States must remain the world's only superpower, unchallenged by any other nation.
- The United States may need to use pre-emptive force (attack an enemy first) in self-defense.
- The United States will, if necessary, act unilaterally (alone) to confront and eliminate threats to American security.

This proposal sparked great controversy. President Bush ordered his secretary of defense, Dick Cheney, to revise the strategy and remove the points about pre-emptive and unilateral action. When Bill Clinton became president in 1993, he continued the policy of containment and deterrence.

In 1998, Iraq expelled U.N. weapons inspectors. Around this same time, a group of national defense critics began to publicly argue for the forced removal of Saddam Hussein because of his potential use of weapons of mass destruction. Called "neo-conservatives" by the press, the group included Libby, Cheney, Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, and other members of the former Reagan and Bush administrations.

When George W. Bush became president in 2001, he appointed Rumsfeld secretary of defense and Wolfowitz as one of his deputy defense secretaries. Vice President Dick Cheney appointed Libby his chief of staff. Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Libby, and Cheney formed the core of neo-conservative influence on national security matters within the Bush administration.

The neo-conservatives wanted to revive the strategy proposed by Wolfowitz and Libby in 1992. They also pushed for the United States to confront hostile regimes and "militant Islam." In addition, they called for the United States to expand democracy and capitalism throughout the world.

Following the devastating terrorist attacks in 2001, Wolfowitz and the other neo-conservatives pressed for an immediate attack on Iraq. Secretary of State Colin Powell, however, persuaded President Bush to first attack the Al Qaeda terrorists and the Taliban regime harboring them in Afghanistan.

In his January 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "[axis of evil](#)." "The United States of America will not permit," Bush said, "the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."

On [September 12, 2002](#), after a sharp debate within the Bush administration over what to do about Iraq, the president addressed the United Nations. He warned that disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction (banned by the U.N. after the 1991 Gulf War) "will be enforced" by the U.N. or, if necessary, by the United States acting unilaterally in self-defense.

In early November 2002, the United Nations adopted a U.S.-sponsored [resolution](#). It stated that Iraq was in "material breach" of previous U.N. resolutions and called for Iraq to immediately disarm and fully cooperate with weapons inspectors or "face serious consequences."

Iraq agreed to comply, and inspectors returned. In their time in Iraq, the inspectors issued three reports, saying that they had not found weapons of mass destruction, but also saying that Iraq needed to be more cooperative. Citing Iraqi lack of cooperation as a material breach of the U.N. resolution, the United States pressed for a new resolution to use force against Iraq. When it saw that the Security Council was not going to approve the new resolution, it withdrew it.

The United States decided to act with a "coalition of the willing" (a group of allies) to remove Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The coalition included Great Britain and 29 other nations. It did not include any Arab states or some NATO members, including Canada, France, Germany, Belgium, and Norway. On March 20, 2003, the coalition forces, consisting mainly of U.S. and British troops, invaded Iraq. The war lasted several weeks and toppled the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein.

The National Security Strategy

President Bush's actions in Iraq seemingly were based on a new defense strategy document titled "[The National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)." The administration released this document to the public in September 2002. Reflecting the long-held views of Wolfowitz, Libby, and other neo-conservative thinkers, the new strategy became known as the "Bush Doctrine." Three of the main points are:

1. Pre-emption. The Bush Doctrine downgrades containment and deterrence in favor of pre-emption. This is the idea that in a world of terrorist organizations, dangerous regimes,

and weapons of mass destruction, the United States may need to attack first. "We cannot let our enemies strike first," the National Security Strategy document warns.

According to the Bush Doctrine, rogue states threaten American security today. These nations are hostile to the United States and are developing chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The new security strategy calls for the United States to stop rogue states before they are able to threaten or use these weapons against us.

The National Security Strategy notes that international law allows nations to take pre-emptive action against a nation that presents an imminent threat. It also states that the United States has long followed this policy. Critics agree, but say that the Bush administration is pursuing a policy of *preventive* war, not *pre-emptive* war. A pre-emptive war is one against an enemy preparing to strike right away. A preventive war is one against an enemy that will pose a danger in the future. The distinction is important, say the critics, because *preventive* war is illegal under international law. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. states: "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. . . . 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.'"

In addition, say critics, American preventive wars may encourage other nations to justify attacks on their enemies. There are many potential conflicts in the world, some even with the danger of nuclear war—the Mideast, India-Pakistan, and North Korea-South Korea. One nation, seeing another as a threat, may decide to wage a preventive war. Since we employ pre-emption, critics argue that other nations could invoke the same principle and American diplomats could do little to argue against the action.

Anticipating the critics, the National Security Strategy recognizes that pre-emptive action in the past required "the existence of an imminent threat—most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack." It says, however, that terrorists and rogue states will not use conventional armies and navies, but rather terrorism and possibly "weapons of mass destruction—weapons that can be easily concealed, delivered covertly, and used without warning." It argues, therefore, that "the concept of imminent threat" must be adapted "to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries." It further states that other nations should not "use pre-emption as a pretext for aggression." It stresses that the "reasons for our actions will be clear, the force measured, and the cause just."

2. Act Alone, If Necessary. The Bush Doctrine identifies methods to achieve its aims such as establishing new military bases in the world, developing defense technology, and expanding intelligence gathering. Diplomacy also has a role to play, especially in the "battle for the future of the Muslim world."

The Bush Doctrine favors the United States acting in cooperation with allies and international institutions like the U.N. to deal with threats to world peace. But the security strategy states that the United States "will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary."

Critics argue that the Bush administration reflexively resorts to unilateralism, acting alone in the world. They cite the administration's withdrawal from three international treaties in its first year in office: the [Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty](#), the [Kyoto Protocol](#) on climate change, and the treaty setting up the [International Criminal Court](#). Writing in the *World Policy Journal*, political science professor David C. Hendrickson states: "Even when the administration makes an approach to international institutions, as it did in its September 2002 demands on the U.N. Security Council [over Iraq], it does so with the explicit reservation that it intends to pursue in any event its chosen course, thus impugning the authority of the council even in the appeal to it." By going it alone in the world, critics say that American power loses its legitimacy and America is perceived as a bully.

Supporters of the Bush doctrine respond that the administration believes deeply in multilateral action whenever possible. They note that many people oppose the treaties that the administration withdrew from. The ABM Treaty, they argue, was outmoded. They believe that the International Criminal Court was harmful to the interests of the United States, and the Kyoto Protocol was purely symbolic. As President Bush states in his introduction to the National Security Strategy: "In all cases, international obligations are to be taken seriously. They are not to be undertaken symbolically to rally support for an ideal without furthering its attainment." As for Iraq, they point out that this was not a unilateral action: The coalition of the willing had many member nations.

3. Extend Freedom. The third major element of the Bush Doctrine is for the United States to "extend the benefits of freedom across the globe" in order to build "a balance of power that favors freedom." The security strategy states that the United States should do this by championing "nonnegotiable demands of human dignity." These include such things as the rule of law, freedom of worship, and respect for women. In addition, the strategy calls for the United States to promote world economic growth through capitalist free markets and free trade.

This is the most idealistic part of the National Security Strategy. It is opposed by critics who consider the policy unrealistic. They point out that it took democracy centuries to take root in Western societies. Societies such as Iraq, which have no democratic tradition, cannot be expected to form democratic institutions quickly. They think the costs of nation building will prove staggering. Other critics think it's wrong for us to impose our way of life, especially our capitalistic system, on other people.

Implications of the Bush Doctrine

After the quick victory in Iraq, reporters asked whether the United States would next pursue military action against Syria, Iran, and North Korea. The Bush administration quickly denied it had any such intentions. South Korea's president called for the United

States to exempt North Korea from its policy of pre-emption, because a war with North Korea would likely result in the destruction of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. The administration refused this request, saying it would leave "all options open." But it stressed that it hoped a diplomatic solution could be reached with North Korea, which is building nuclear weapons.

For Discussion and Writing

1. How does the Bush Doctrine differ from the containment policy of the Cold War?
2. The National Security Strategy states that "deterrence based only upon the threat of retaliation is less likely to work against leaders of rogue states" Do you agree? Explain.
3. What do you think President Bush should do if Iran and North Korea proceed with developing nuclear weapons? Why?
4. Do you think that the Bush Doctrine will help or hinder the United States in its war on terrorism? Explain.

For Further Information

[Constitutional Rights Foundation's War in Iraq: Web Links: Bush Doctrine](#)