

**The Ethical Limits to Preventive War  
Final Report**

**Carnegie Council Fellows Program: Ethics and the Use of Force**

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In its broadest scope, this research project is designed to evaluate whether there is any evidence to support the long-standing claim that democracies, particularly the United States, consider the use of military force under preventive war conditions ethically problematic. While the larger project includes a set of historic cases going back to the early Cold War period, and explores how an anti-preventive war norm may be reflected at both the congressional and public levels, my Carnegie Council-sponsored research this year has focused on public attitudes regarding the Iraq war of 2003. In doing so, I was able to execute my original research plan as intended, early in the fellowship year, which allowed me to collect and analyze data for a paper presented at the International Studies Association conference in March 2004.

The most important specific task completed was the national level survey I conducted in mid-November, which was funded entirely by the grant from the Carnegie Council fellowship. While many public opinion polls have asked Americans about their level of support for war with Iraq before the war began, and pollsters have tracked how well Americans think the president is handling the occupation of Iraq, very little survey data has been collected on the specific issue of whether Americans accept the preventive war logic that was a primary reason cited by the Bush administration for the war. My survey sought to generate data on whether public support for the use of force depended on the imminence or concreteness of a putative threat. Are Americans reluctant to accept the use of force in cases that do not present a clear and impending threat? Under what conditions are Americans willing to accept the use of force even when the threat is neither certain nor imminent? Finally, and as important, is there such a thing as a relatively uniform “democratic” or “general public” attitude on the use of force against varying degrees of threat, that cuts across demographic lines (political party, ideology, sex, age, education, region)?

In consultation with several colleagues at West Point and several outside experts on public opinion, I developed a six question survey that addresses these issues. The first three survey questions focus on the respondents' willingness to support the use of force in several hypothetical preventive war situations. The first question presents the most abstract situation: whether the respondent believes that as a general policy the US should avoid the use of force against states that do not pose an imminent threat to the US. Essentially this question taps whether Americans are comfortable with a general preventive war policy (the so-called "preemption" policy of the Bush administration). The next question becomes more specific by introducing the use of force against a state suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction, even if that state does not pose an imminent threat to the US (and therefore still a case of preventive war). The third question becomes more specific still by naming Iran as the state suspected of developing nuclear weapons, and the respondents' willingness to use force to stop this development even if there is no evidence that Iran is actually planning to use those weapons or threaten their use. These three questions allowed me to evaluate the degree to which Americans approve or disapprove of a preventive war policy in the abstract, compared to situations in which the source of the threat (type of weapon and identity of target state) is specified. Before running the survey I hypothesized that large numbers of respondents would disapprove of a preventive war strategy in the abstract, but become more supportive as the identity of the threat became more specific.

The next set of questions ask respondents to reflect on how the war with Iraq has affected their attitudes about preventive war situations. The fourth survey question asks whether a respondent's support for US action in Iraq hinges on actually finding solid evidence of a WMD program. The next question then asks if the US does not find evidence of an Iraqi WMD

program, will this change the respondents' willingness to use force against other countries suspected of developing WMD? The final question asks whether an individual's level of trust in the Bush administration to accurately characterize the threat from other states (Iran, Syria, North Korea) will be affected by the failure to find evidence of an Iraqi WMD program. Taken together, these three questions test how closely an individual's willingness to support the use of force is tied to concrete evidence of a potential adversary's actual threat capabilities. The less an individual's support for the use of force is contingent on concrete evidence of a threat, the more likely he or she is to support the use of force in preventive war situations (and the easier it will be for political leaders to generate public support for using force in preventive war situations). The trust question taps directly into how forgiving the public is when confronted with evidence that the actual nature of the threat does not match the president's pre-war characterization of the threat. Are respondents still willing to follow presidential cues when evaluating future potential threats when the president's past cues were seen to be mistaken? In addition to these six substantive questions, the survey collected demographic data on the respondents, to include political party, ideology, age, education, sex, employment status, and geographic region. This data allowed me to evaluate a range of correlations to better understand the distribution of attitudes on preventive war among different subgroups in the American population.

To administer the survey I contracted with a public opinion research firm, Moore Information located in Portland, Oregon, in early October 2003. Their research consultants helped me fine tune the question wording, response options, and order. From 10 to 13 November 2003 Moore Information administered this survey by phone to a national sample of registered American voters (N=800, sampling error +/- 3%). By 17 November Moore Information had prepared a comprehensive set of summary statistics on all questions in the

survey, and produced a full set of cross-tabulated correlations of all substantive and demographic questions for my analysis.

The findings from this survey, even though it represents a single snapshot of opinion at a particular time, not only confirmed my working hypotheses on the distribution of an anti-preventive war norm within the American population, it provided crucial insights for use in future research on this question. The results from this survey highlighted the stark divide in attitudes on preventive war based on political ideology and party identity. In essence, it confirmed that there is no relatively uniform “democratic” norm on preventive war. What the close-ended structure of survey questions cannot tell us, however, is why variation in the worldview of political conservatives, liberals and moderates consistently produces variation in attitudes on the normative aspects of the use of military force. What is it about a conservative political ideology, a liberal ideology, a moderate ideology, that produces distinct attitudes on the ethics of preventive war? The best way to explore this particular question is through the interview method, which allows respondents to articulate their beliefs in an open –ended yet structured format. The next phase of this research, therefore, will be based on focus group interviews I will conduct in 2004-2005 across the United States.

One of the main challenges of conducting research of this type is that an individual’s perspective on a given security problem will be shaped by more than just their normative evaluation of the rectitude of using force under particular circumstances. In other words, it is very difficult to isolate an individual’s ethical perspective from other factors that will affect their views on the use of force, such as the likelihood of paying particular costs, both human and material, their judgment of the likelihood of success if force is used, their attitudes about the political leaders in office at this time (positive and negative) who intend to carry out this policy,

or beliefs about second-order consequences that may degrade or increase their willingness to support the use of force in a particular situation. Even if we confirm that a particular groups' normative orientation toward the use of force should lead them to accept or reject preventive war as a strategic option, other variables may decrease or increase their tolerance for such a policy in a particular case.

This actually opens up an important avenue for further research on democracy and preventive war that this project has so far ignored. In the literature on this question, two arguments are offered to explain why democracies may be less willing to initiate preventive war than non-democracies. In addition to the normative argument explored in this research, other scholars have postulated that democracies may be reluctant to engage in preventive war for strategic cost/benefit reasons. From a strategic perspective, a decision to launch a preventive war must be based on one's ability to calculate that accepting the guaranteed costs of war today is preferable to confronting the possibility of war at some time in the future. This is a very difficult calculation to make with any degree of confidence, because in most cases there is no reason to believe that future war is inevitable, or that it will be much more costly in the future than today. As a result, some have argued that democratic citizens will be highly reluctant to pay the guaranteed costs of a war their state initiates, when there is little certainty that they are actually saving higher future costs.

As the occupation of Iraq drags on with continuing costs and increasing uncertainty about a satisfactory endstate, public opinion in the United States has been progressively turning against the war and President Bush. Specifically, there has been a steady erosion in the belief that the costs America is now paying are acceptable relative to whatever future costs or problems America may have prevented by launching this war. While the Iraq case undermines the

argument that there is a democratic anti-preventive war norm, the actual experience of fighting a preventive war in Iraq may produce strong domestic resistance to applying the preventive war option in cases beyond Iraq. My future research on this project will expand to track how Americans determine the relative value of strategic alternatives to face an uncertain threat environment, and how the Iraq war affects calculations in the public mind of the costs and benefits of preventive war versus other options.