

Special Report

ISOLATION, LIMITED WAR, TOTAL WAR, CONTAINMENT, INTERVENTION AND PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKES

by

Clinton H. Whitehurst, Jr.*

**Emeritus Professor of Management and Economics
and Senior Fellow, Strom Thurmond Institute**

**Clemson University,
Clemson, South Carolina**

2002

**THE
STROM THURMOND
INSTITUTE**



ISOLATION, LIMITED WAR, TOTAL WAR, CONTAINMENT, INTERVENTION AND PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKES

The more things change, the more they remain the same

American public opinion and American policy with respect to committing military forces to combat or withdrawing them after they are committed, often exhibit a lead-lag relationship. Thus, when a proposed new (or changed) policy is ahead of public opinion, the task of the administration in power and congressional supporters is to educate the public as to why the change is necessary. The run-up to World Wars I and II are examples of an administration preparing the public for war.

On the other hand, when a growing majority of the voters favor a major policy change, but one that is controversial, the pressure is on those opposing change. Such was the case with respect to ending the Vietnam War after 1968 and the Korean conflict after 1951.

When U.S. military forces are involved in a foreign war partisanship generally stops at the water's edge. Public opinion insists that the country's elected officials support the president and the men and women in uniform. However, the depth and extent of this support depends upon the circumstances leading up to the commitment. In this regard, public support for a declaration of war against the Empire of Japan was overwhelming after Pearl Harbour. The reasons for the conflict were clear and unambiguous. (1) Where goals were less clear as in World War I, support was correspondingly less. (2) And in regional conflicts such as Korea, Vietnam, and the 1991 Persian Gulf War, where America's self interest and ultimate goals were unclear, support was still less.(3)

This paper reviews the background, debates and controversies leading up to the commitment of American military forces in 20th and 21st century conflicts in the context of then existing U.S. foreign policy—isolationism, containment, and intervention.

Isolationism

In the 20th century, isolationism, here defined as “avoiding foreign entanglements” and conflicts, was the dominant theme in U.S. foreign policy till the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and America's entry into World War II.

The aftermath of World War I, a war in which the United States and its allies were victorious, failed to change an American foreign policy that remained by and large isolationist. This sentiment became apparent in the November 1918 elections, an election that focused on President Wilson's war policies. The result was a Republican Party takeover of the Congress. The later defeat in the United States Senate of the treaty that would have made the United States a member of the League of Nations, if anything, hardened isolationist sentiment. (4)

In the 1930s isolationist sentiment clearly dominated U.S. foreign policy as seen with passage by the Congress of the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936 and 1937, at a time when Europe was moving ever closer to war.

In July of 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt failed to amend the 1937 Neutrality Act at a time when large Democrat majorities controlled the Congress. And in August 1941, his proposal to extend the length of service specified in the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 from one year to 18 months, passed the House of Representatives by only one vote, 203-202.

The cost of World War II to America in terms of lives and treasure and a desire to avoid another such conflict, insured its support for any arrangement/organization that might peacefully resolve disputes among nations. Thus, in 1945 it could be fairly said that isolationism, while not dead, would never again be the dominant force in American foreign policy. On July 28, 1945 the United States Senate vote for ratification of the United Nations Charter was overwhelmingly in favor, 89-2. (5)

Limited Wars

World War I

Contrasted to World War II, World War I was a limited war with limited and unclear objectives. In essence, it was a 19th century war fought in the 20th century where the losers were forced to pay the winners in territory and reparations. (6) And while the Treaty of Versailles was clear on specific issues, i.e., how the Allies divided the spoils of war, it failed to address the long term issue of how to effectively deal with historic German militarism.

Korean War

To circumvent the Constitutional provision that only Congress can declare war, the Truman Administration characterized the conflict as a "police action." And while the

contribution of military forces by United Nations member states to defend South Korea under American leadership helped militarily, it insured that there would be disagreements with respect to the conduct of the war and what would constitute an acceptable end to the conflict. (7)

At the beginning of the conflict in June 1950 public support was, at best, moderate. The military and political strategies for fighting the war were almost immediately contentious. As an example, the Republicans in the Congress favored bringing the Republic of China on Taiwan into the conflict. This was opposed by the Truman Administration and a number of World War II military leaders, the most vocal being “Vinegar Joe” Stillwell, who harbored a long standing animosity against Generalissimo Chang Kai Shek, then President of the ROC.

In the Congressional elections of 1950 Democrat majorities were reduced in both houses of Congress. On April 11, 1951, President Harry Truman relieved General Douglas MacArthur as commander of UN forces in Korea when the dispute between the President and General over attacking North of the Yalu River, i.e., China proper, became public knowledge. Following MacArthur’s dismissal, some Republicans in Congress called for a plural impeachment of the President and then Secretary of State, Dean Acheson.

In 1952 the public, frustrated by the Truman Administration’s inability to end the conflict, elected Republican Dwight David Eisenhower President. A truce ending the conflict was signed in 1953.

Vietnam

The Vietnam War was a classic example of a nation getting into a major conflict in small, incremental steps over a period of time, beginning with President John F Kennedy sending a handful of military advisors to Vietnam and his political attempts to broaden the base of the South Vietnam government. (8)

If there was a year to date the beginning of American involvement in Vietnam it would be 1954. In May of that year the French stronghold of Dienbienphu was captured by Viet Minh resistance forces that had been fighting France for almost 10 years. (9) And although the United States had supported the French with funds prior to 1954, the Eisenhower administration never considered becoming directly engaged in the conflict.

Following the French withdrawal from Indo China and failed attempts to form an inclusive national government, an agreement was signed in Geneva dividing Vietnam into

North and South nation states and at the same time recognizing Laos and Cambodia as independent countries. Also in 1954, lead by the United States, a treaty, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), was signed by pro-western countries in East and Southeast Asia. Its purpose was to resist communist aggression in the region.

Ten years later, following the assassination of President Kennedy, the Johnson administration made it quite clear that the United States would aid South Vietnam in its fight to remain independent, i.e., resist attempts by North Vietnam to unify the country by force. This assistance included funds, equipment and military and political advisors to the South Vietnam government as well financing various covert operations throughout the area.

The defining moment with respect to America's direct participation in the conflict came on August 2d and 4th 1964 when the Johnson administration alleged an attack by North Vietnam on two U.S. destroyers, the *Joy Turner* and *Maddox*, then on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin. On August 7, 1964 the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was passed by Congress. Military action was approved "to repel any attack against the (armed) forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression. (10) The House was unanimous; the vote in the Senate was 88-2. A Harris poll published on August 11th showed a 14 point increase in President Johnson's popularity.

Over the next six years, the United States increased its involvement in the conflict by bombing North Vietnam and committing large military forces to fight alongside the South Vietnam army. But as in the case of Korea, there was no definite end game and exit strategy. On the home front the war had become immensely unpopular, so unpopular that President Johnson announced on March 31st that he would not seek re-election.

The 1991 Gulf War

On August 2, 1990 Iraq invaded and annexed its neighbor, Kuwait. Then President George H.W. Bush responded by initially deploying some 225,000 Army, Navy and Air Force personnel to the region. Later, large additional forces were committed. The United Nations Security Council condemned the attack and imposed a total economic embargo on Iraq. The United States, however, went beyond economic sanctions to lead a military coalition of Western powers, mainly Great Britain and France to drive the Iraqis from Kuwait. Other allied nations contributed token forces. Several, including Japan, contributed money. A number of Arab states sent troops to protect Saudi Arabia. The Soviet Union took a benign position with respect to America's unexpected response to the Iraqi invasion, agreeing that UN action was necessary but also criticizing American forces buildup in the region.

America's action was far from universally approved. Many Arab states openly condemned military action arguing that the Iraq-Kuwait dispute was an "Arab affair," best solved by the Arab states themselves. Moreover, several Arab nations, e.g. Sudan, Libya and Jordan supported Iraqi grievances against Kuwait. Further complicating the diplomatic situation was the on-going "Palestine Problem" as between Israel and West Bank Palestinians.

The Bush policy of militarily intervening in a Mid East war insured that the debate in the Congress over committing American forces to a large scale military action would be long and heated.

On January 12, 1991, House Joint Resolution 77 authorizing military action under the 1973 War Powers Resolution was passed by Congress; House of Representatives 250-183, Senate 52-47. Later the Senate voted 97-1 for additional funds to cover incremental costs of Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Following a short but intense air campaign, military success on the ground was swift and decisive. Iraqi forces were driven from Kuwait in a matter of days. However, Saddam Hussein's vaunted Republican Guard was allowed to retreat back into Iraq in tact. The cease fire terms imposed a number of conditions on Iraq including "No fly zones" for Iraqi aircraft in the North and South parts of the country together with economic sanctions. However, when all was said and done the (Iraq) government that had initiated the conflict remained in place.

Total War

World War II

Total war implies total victory, not a conflict wherein truce or cease fire terms are negotiated. If this is granted, with the exception of the American War Between the States, World War II is the only total war in which the United States has committed military forces. And, as noted earlier, it was a war, not only supported at the beginning of the conflict, but one that was strongly supported by the public for almost four years when victory in the first years was a matter of faith and not predicated on battlefield successes. The defining characteristic of World War II when contrasted with other 20th century conflicts, is that, from the outset, goals were clearly stated. In other words, total victory meant nothing less than total victory.

Containment and Intervention

Containment and intervention, in the case of the United States, are policies designed to *avoid* the commitment of large military forces in a major conflict such as World War II without jeopardizing national security and national interests. Actually, containment and intervention are different sides of the same coin. In pursuing a policy of containment, intervention is often necessary. When intervention is undertaken, the stated goal is usually containment.

To contain the expansionist plans of the Soviet Union after World War II, the U.S. intervened in Grenada, Nicaragua, Angola, the Congo Republic, Cuba, Somalia, and Afghanistan among lesser others. Containment was generally practiced by use of surrogate (usually local) military or para-military forces, extensive military and economic aid, and when advantageous, using various forums of public opinion. And while it might be argued that Korea and Vietnam were fought to *contain* communism, the casualties in these conflicts exceed the above definition, i.e., the use of minimum military force to achieve a goal. (11)

Initiatives to contain the People's Republic of China's expansionist policies included maintaining a strong position in the Western Pacific, i.e., the U.S. Seventh Fleet, a Mutual Defense Treaty with Japan which allowed stationing of troops in that country, a Mutual Defense Treaty with the Republic of Korea and basing of forces in that country, and the Taiwan Relations Act which allowed the United States to sell defensive arms to that country and also implied that the United States would come to Taiwan's assistance should China seek to conquer the island nation by force.

America's policy of containment has enjoyed success as well as failure with some results in between. Undoubtedly the most successful containment of Soviet ambitions following World War II was the U.S. lead North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military alliance. As considered in this paper, peacekeeping operations are a form of containment.

Pre-emptive Military Action

Pre-emptive military action as defined by the American Century Dictionary is "(military) action intended to prevent attack by disabling the enemy." Two possibilities flow from this definition. The first is a "surprise attack," i.e., no warning given to the targeted adversary. The second is a warning of pre-emptive military action unless specific conditions are met. Note that in this option, while the warning is conveyed, the time of attack is not. Generally, pre-emptive military action is not dependent on a declared state of war.

Some examples of Twentieth and Twenty First Century actions include:

Surprise Attack

No clearly stated conditions presented by aggrieved nation that, having been met, would avoid attack

- *Germany's invasion of Poland, 1939
- *Germany's attack on Russia, 1941
- *Japan's attack on the United States, 1941
- *North Korea invasion of South Korea, 1950
- *Egypt and Syria attack Israel, 1973
- *Israel air strike on Iraq nuclear facilities, 1981
- *Iraq invasion of Kuwait, 1990

In all of the above surprise attacks, the attacking nation argued its security and/or national interests were threatened and hence the pre-emptive military action was justified. e.g. Japan's assertion that its national security was threatened by the U.S. oil and iron embargo.

Attack After Warning

Clearly stated conditions, that having been met, would avoid attack

- *British attack on French fleet at Oran and Dakar, 1940(12)
- *U.S. invades Grenada, 1983
- *U.S. air strike on Libya, 1986
- *U.S. invasion of Panama, 1989

*U.S. lead coalition attack on Iraq, 1991

*NATO attack on Yugoslavia, 1999

*U.S. lead attack on Afghanistan (Taliban), 2001

Conclusion

There exists a latent isolationist sentiment in a broad section of the American public that is little influenced by the cliché that the United States is a world superpower or the only remaining military and economic superpower on the planet and as such must always play a leading role in solving world problems.

When there is a clear and well understood danger to America's national security, the public will demand military action if its leaders are hesitant, and conversely, will withhold support when the goals of a particular conflict are unclear and ambiguous and a strong case for national security is lacking

When American forces are initially committed to combat, public support has two distinctly characteristics. First, support for the military is generally unconditional, i.e., what is needed to win will be provided at whatever the cost. Second, the public expects its military and political leaders to use every means at their disposal to end the conflict on terms favorable to the United States. When "less than favorable terms" are accepted, public dissatisfaction is made known at the ballot box.

Pre-emptive military actions are not new. Surprise attacks and attacks after a warning is given have long histories. To its credit, the United States has never launched a surprise attack such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 194 but has taken a number of pre-emptive military actions.

On September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by terrorist forces. Within hours of the attack, the United States declared war on terrorists and terrorist states worldwide. And as in times past the public rallied in support of the President. And, as was the case in World War II, the President promised nothing less than total victory in a war in which there was no end in sight. All sides agreed that the war on terror was a new type of war that would be waged by unconventional means.

In the year following September 11th, military successes were achieved as well as failures. And as in past conflicts, it was only a matter of time until critics of the Administration's strategy and tactics were heard. Most contentious was the President

Bush's stated purpose of requiring Iraq to give up its weapons of mass destruction, i.e., chemical, biological, and nuclear programs, by use of military force if necessary.

There was, however, one thing that made the debate over how to disarm Iraq unique. It was the use of the terms pre-emptive strike and pre-emptive war. As would have been noted by long ago grammar school English teachers, they became "overworked words."

Critics of the Administration's hard line toward Iraq seized on the words pre-emptive and pre-emptive war as if they had never existed prior to September 11th 2001. For them, pre-emptive strike and pre-emptive war became pejorative terms indicating reckless and non-rational behavior. Pre-emptive strikes and pre-emptive wars were analyzed and commented upon worldwide by the public, pundits, pollsters, and politicians. Those favoring pre-emptive military action were daily called upon to explain and defend their position.

Examples of comments with respect to "pre-emptive strikes" and "pre-emptive war" include:

*"Bush's policy of pre-emptive war is immoral-such a policy would legitimize Pearl Harbour." Helen Thomas, former Dean of White House correspondents and now a columnist for Hearst News Service (13)

*The Bush (pre-emption) doctrine is a doctrine of pre-emptive war in the name of a new U.S. imperialism. Senator Edward Kennedy, D-Mass. (14)

*Pre-emption is a slippery slope that could easily lead to "a perpetual state of war to achieve peace." Ivan Eland, Director of Defense Policy Studies, Cato Institute. (14)

*Bush's pre-emption doctrine is "revolutionary." It challenges a system of international sovereignty established by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The treaty elicited the principle of non intervention in domestic affairs by foreign states. Even seemingly justified pre-emption "runs counter to modern international law, which sanctions the use of force in self defense only against actual, not potential, threats." Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of State. (14)

Critics of the doctrine of pre-emptive military action are inconsistent in several respects. First, they generally agree with the concept of a total war on terrorism but not the means of achieving military success as practiced in the only total war the United States has ever fought, i.e., World War II.

Second, they ignore the many instances where America has undertaken pre-emptive military action, actions that were highly approved by the public.

Third, they have failed to consider the lessons of past pre-emptive military actions. For while presidents usually enjoy wide public support at the beginning of a conflict, unless the conflict is relatively short and decisive, public support fades and sometimes becomes hostile. In this regard, recall the problems cited earlier of President Wilson (World War I), President Truman (Korean War), and President Johnson (Vietnam War).

To believe that President Bush, or any president, could maintain any degree of public support for pre-emptive military actions absent a direct, well understood threat or attack on the United States, defies logic and history. It thus follows that a pre-emptive strike against Iraq (with warning), should it occur, can in no way be viewed as ushering in a new foreign policy that countenances pre-emptive military action at the discretion of a sitting American president. As the above review of history shows, presidents who exceed their military action mandates pay a high political price. A pre-emptive military “strike too far” would be no exception. (15)

Addendum

One might consider the consequences of a pre-emptive strike against Germany in 1936 after it invaded the demilitarized Rhineland, an open breach of the Treaty of Locarno. In Hitler’s words:

We had no army worth mentioning; at that time it would not even have had the fighting strength to maintain itself against the Poles. If the French had taken any action, we would have been easily defeated; our resistance would have been over in a few days. And what air force we had then was ridiculous. A few Junkers 52’s from Lufthansa, and not even enough bombs for them. (16)

NOTES

(1) Following Pearl Harbour, Congress declared war on the Empire of Japan 388-1 in the House of Representatives and 82-0 in the Senate.

(2) When President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany and its allies in 1917, the vote, after a relatively brief but contentious debate, was: House of Representatives 373-50 in favor; Senate 82-6 in favor.

(3) Opposition to the Korean and Vietnam Wars was largely fueled by a lack of a clear American goal, the so-called end game; mounting casualties with no end in sight, and with respect to Vietnam, the increasingly unpopular Military Selective Service Act of 1967, an act perceived to discriminate by economic class of citizen.

(4) A number of reasons are cited for the defeat of the Treaty. One was the arrogance of President Wilson in failing to explain to Congress and the nation his reasons for endorsing the treaty. A second was that the enforcement provisions of the treaty were unclear which led to fear that the United States could become involved in a war in which there was no paramount American interest. And last, the historical isolationist sentiment of the public, particularly in the American heartland.

(5) At the end of World War II the United States became a founding member of the United Nations. Its influence in drafting the UN Charter is apparent. Remembering the fate of the League of Nations, the United States as a permanent member of the Security Council, can exercise a veto over a UN sponsored military action. (All other permanent members of the Council—Russia, France, China, and Great Britain have the same prerogative) Absent this veto power it is highly unlikely that the United States would have approved the Charter.

(6) Examples include: Great Britain received Germany's East and Southwest Africa colonies; Japan, German islands in the Pacific. The Ottoman Empire was broken up and various areas put under League of Nations mandates. In addition, Germany was forced to pay reparations that history later showed it could not afford.

(7) Disagreements occurred with respect to what constituted a successful conclusion to the conflict. Return the boundary between North and South Korea to pre-June 1950?

Unify North and South Korea by UN military forces? Attack Chinese forces north of the Yalu River, i.e., China proper after China committed large numbers of troops in support of North Korea? And with a cease fire, the contentious issue of repatriation of prisoners.

(8) When the French withdrew from Indo-China in 1954, and successive attempts to create a national government failed, the country was divided into North (communist) Vietnam and South (Western oriented) South Vietnam. When it became clear that the North intended to unify the country by subversion and military force, the United States called upon the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to intervene in support of the South. Initially some support was forthcoming but as the conflict widened, this support was withdrawn leaving only the United States and South Vietnam to oppose aggression from the North.

(9) The Viet Minh was the resistance group lead by communist military commander Ho Chi Minh.

(10) Senator Barry Goldwater categorically stated in his autobiography, "Goldwater," that an attack on the *Turner Joy* never took place and that there was a question as to whether there was an air attack on the *Maddox* two days later. He went on to say that the Congress voted on the Tonkin Gulf Resolution without all the facts of the event being known.

(11) Korean War casualties, dead and wounded, were 140,200' Vietnam, 211,556; the 1991 Gulf War, 766.

(12) On July 3, 1940, Great Britain demanded that French warships at Oran and Dakar be disabled by French authorities to the satisfaction of the British government or be engaged and sunk by the British fleet. Negotiations failed. British Vice Admiral Somerville with "Force H" launched a pre-emptive strike at 5:54 PM. Four French battleships were put out of action.

(13) *MIT Tech Talk*, November 6, 2002 published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass.

(14) Yaukey, John, Gannett News Service. *Bush's pre-emption doctrine debated*. September 16, 2002.

(15) It could be reasonably argued that some critics of the concept of pre-emptive strikes/wars are using the debate to covertly undermine other actions by President Bush that they disdain but are generally supported by the public. i.e., abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic

Missile Treaty with the Russian federation; refusing to accept the Kyoto accord with its present restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions; and refusal to accept International Court of Justice jurisdiction over U.S. forces deployed in foreign countries. In addition, President Bush has voiced opposition to several UN and European Union “worldwide” proposals that impact on American customs and security. e.g. the death penalty in capital cases.

(16) Speer, Albert. *Inside the Third Reich*, Avon Books, New York, 1970, p. 113.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bacon, Donald C., Davidson, Roger H., Kelly, Morton, *Encyclopedia of the United States Congress*, Vol. 2 and 3. Simon and Schuster, NY 1995.
- Churchill, Sir Winston. *The Second World War: Their Finest Hour*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA 1949.
- Colliers *Encyclopedia Yearbook (Covering Years 1964, 1991)*. Crowell-Collier Publishing Co., NY 1965 and 1992.
- Couch, William T., ed. *Colliers Encyclopedia, Vol. 11 and 19*. Collier and Son, NY 1956.
- Goldwater, Barry with Casserley, Jack. *Goldwater*. Doubleday, NY 1988.
- Speer, Albert. *Inside the Third Reich*. Avon Books, NY 1970
Stockdale, Jim and Sybil. *In Love and War*. Harper and Row, NY 1984.
- Westmoreland, General William C. *A Soldier Reports*. Doubleday, Garden City, NY 1976.
- World Almanac and Book of Facts 1999*. World Almanac Books, Primedia Reference, Inc., Mahwah, NY 1998.