Preventive War and Democratic Politics

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I define the concept of preventive war, distinguish it from preemption and other sources of better-now-than-later logic, and examine numerous conceptual issues that confound theoretical and empirical analyses of prevention. I then consider the argument that democracies rarely if ever adopt preventive war strategies because such strategies are contrary to the preferences of democratic publics and to the values and identities of democratic states. I examine a number of historical cases of anticipated power shifts by democratic states, and analyze the motivations for war and the mobilization of public support for war. The evidence contradicts both the descriptive proposition that democracies do not adopt preventive war strategies and causal propositions about the constraining effects of democratic institutions and democratic political cultures.

Preventive war is a strategy designed to forestall an adverse shift in the balance of power and driven by better-now-than-later logic. Faced with a rising and potentially hostile adversary, it is better to fight now rather than risk the likely consequences of inaction—a decline in relative power, diminishing bargaining leverage, and the risk of war under less favorable circumstances later.

The concept of preventive war is a familiar one to diplomatic historians, political leaders, international relations theorists, and international legal scholars and just-war theorists. Historians have used the term to characterize the causes of numerous wars and limited military strikes, ranging from the Peloponnesian War to the Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981.[1] Political leaders from Frederick the Great to George W. Bush have explicitly invoked the concept, sometimes to justify a policy they regarded as imperative and sometimes to criticize a policy they saw as unnecessarily risky. Preventive logic has long been central to realist theories of international conflict, including Morgenthau's (1948) balance-of-power theory, Gilpin's (1981) hegemonic-transition theory, and Copeland's (2000) dynamic-differentials theory.[2] Prevention is one of several possible causal mechanisms intervening between power shifts and war in power-transition theory (Kugler and Lemke 1996) and in long-cycle theory (Rasler and Thompson 1994), and its logic underlies the commitment problem in the bargaining model of war (Fearon 1995; Powell 2006). Questions of the moral and legal

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[1] Thucydides (1996, 16) argued that the underlying cause of the Peloponnesian War was ''Sparta's fear of the rising power of Athens.''

[2] Preventive war strategies fit nicely into offensive realist theory, and it is odd that Mearsheimer (2001) never mentions them.

status of prevention and preemption have also been a key focus of theories of anticipatory self-defense and the law of war (Walzer 1977).

Despite a long history of preventive behavior, only a limited theoretical literature had emerged by the end of the Cold War (Levy 1987; Vagts 1956; Van Evera 1999). That all changed with the Bush Administration's emphasis on the logic of prevention in its National Security Strategy and in its initial rationalization for the 2003 Iraq War. Public intellectuals debated the causal role of preventive logic in U.S. decision-making leading up to the Iraq War and the appropriateness of U.S. preventive strikes against other aspiring nuclear powers. Historians and political scientists began to examine the role of preemption and prevention in the history of American foreign policy, in part to assess the extent to which this aspect of the Bush Doctrine constituted a new departure in American foreign policy (Gaddis 2004; Trachtenberg 2007). Scholars examined other historical cases in an attempt to understand the conditions under which states are most likely to adopt strategies of prevention (Copeland 2000; Renshon 2006; Ripsman and Levy 2007), and to examine the possible constraining effects of democratic institutions and political cultures (Schweller 1992; Silverstone 2007). Philosophers and international legal theorists began to rethink conventional theories of anticipated self-defense in a changing technological and political environment (Doyle 2008; Luban 2004; Shue and Rodin 2007).[3]

This surge of research has enhanced our understanding of preventive war, but still left us short of a satisfactory theory. Conceptual problems remain, as many scholars continue to confuse prevention and preemption or to define the concept so broadly that it loses its analytic utility. We lack a set of conditional generalizations that specify which kinds of states, facing which kinds of rising adversaries, adopt preventive military strategies instead of other strategies, and under what conditions. This is a serious omission, because narrowing power differentials do not usually lead to preventive attacks (Lemke 2003). The unconditional argument that democracies do not fight preventive wars, once widely accepted, is no longer credible; yet there is hardly any empirical research on this question (Schweller 1992). Scholars have given almost no attention to the consequences of preventive strategies—for the preventer, for the target, and for the international system.

I cannot deal with all of these issues in this essay, but I can move things forward on a number of fronts. First, I define the concept of prevention, distinguish it from preemption and other sources of better-now-than-later logic, and deal with a number of conceptual issues that impede theoretical development and empirical research on preventive war. I then turn to the question of whether democracies are significantly inhibited in their preventive use of military force. I specify the theoretical arguments advanced on behalf of the democracies-do-not-fight-preventive-wars proposition, and assess the validity of those causal mechanisms in a number of historical cases. I give only passing attention to moral and legal aspects of prevention and preemption, or to the consequences of preventively-motivated wars or limited strikes.

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[3] Most modern theories of anticipatory self defense begin with the criteria proposed by U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster in the 1837 *Caroline* case. Webster argued that the use of force in self-defense is justified only if the "necessity of self-defence is instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation," and if force is not "unreasonable or excessive." Daniel Webster, letters to British Foreign Minister Lord Ashbutton, August 6, 1842, and to Mr. Fox, April 24, 1841. Cited in Henkin, Pugh, Schachter, and Smit (1980, 890–891). These basic criteria of necessity, imminency, and proportionality are widely accepted in customary international law and in theories of just war. Walzer (1977, 80–85) argued for "the moral necessity of rejecting any attack that is merely preventive in character that does not wait upon and respond to the willful acts of an adversary."

The Concept of Preventive War

Scholars have applied the concept of prevention not only to such relatively straightforward cases as the 1981 Israeli attack against the Iraqi nuclear reactor (Nakdimon 1987; Perlmutter, Handel, and Bar-Joseph 2003), German policy in 1914 (Fischer 1967), and to the Bush Doctrine, but also to U.S. military interventions on its western frontier in the 19th century, in Central America in the early 20th century (Gaddis 2004), and in Grenada in 1983 (Mueller et al. 2006, 182–187). The expansive view of prevention by some reflects continued ambiguity regarding the meaning of the term and threatens to strip the concept of analytic utility. Admittedly, no single definition is optimal for all theoretical purposes, and different theoretical aims might call for different definitions. My primary aim is to understand the causes of war, which requires an assessment of the relative weights of different causal variables and of their interaction effects, and I proceed with that objective in mind.[4]

We can talk about a state's strategy of preventive war, driven by better-now-than-later logic (as further refined below). We can also talk about the preventive motivation for war, or preventive logic, as a variable that intervenes between power shifts and war and that provides one possible causal mechanism through which the former can lead to the latter. The concept of "*a* preventive war," though widely used, is problematic. It implies that preventive war is a type of war, as defined by its causes. Like any categorization of outcomes in terms of their causes, this confounds cause and effect in a single concept and complicates efforts to explain outcomes. Most wars have multiple causes, and to identify a war as "a preventive war" privileges one cause over others. It also emphasizes the motivations of one state while neglecting those of the other.

Referring to a particular war as preventive would not be a problem if the preventive motivation was a sufficient condition for the war—if current issues, conflicts of interest, and perceptions of adversary intentions played no role, and if the only issue was future power and the bargaining leverage it provided. Yet I have not been able to find a single case that qualifies.[5]

One can find numerous cases for which the preventive motivation was a necessary condition for war. Many of these cases involved other necessary conditions, however, and labeling the war as preventive privileges one necessary condition over others and downgrades the causal impact of other causal variables.[6]

Preventive logic can also influence the timing of a war sought for other reasons, and it would be misleading to characterize the war as "a preventive war." An important motivation for the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 was the perception that Soviet economic power and military potential were growing while Germany's was reaching its peak, leaving a window of opportunity for war in the east that would close by 1943 (Copeland 2000, 137–144; Tooze 2007). Given Hitler's well-established plans for a war in the east (Mawdsley 2005; Weinberg 1994), however, it would be misleading to explain the war itself primarily in terms of preventive logic—unless, perhaps, one were to argue that adverse demographic trends in the east were the primary motivation for Hitler's expansionist policies (Weisiger 2008).

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[4] This section draws on Levy (2007).

[5] As Kydd (1997, 148) argues, "preventive wars sparked by fears about the future motivations of currently benign states almost never happen." The Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 come close to a "pure" case of prevention, but as I show later even that falls short.

[6] On possible criteria for evaluating the relative causal weights of multiple necessary conditions, see Goertz and Levy (2007, 39–43).

A similar argument applies to preemption, which by definition causally preempts something that the initiator believes is about to happen for other reasons.[7] The concept of ''a preemptive war'' may help to describe the proximate path to war, but it fails to capture the underlying causes of the war.[8]

For these reasons, it is better to avoid the concept of ''a preventive war'' and focus instead on the preventive motivation for war as a causal variable that intervenes between power shifts and war. Given my emphasis on the anticipation of a power shift and the fear of its consequences, I treat the preventive motivation as a perceptual variable, the strength of which varies with psychological as well as structural factors. An alternative approach would be to treat the preventive motivation as an ''objective'' variable, equivalent to changes in relative capabilities. This is useful for the important task of assessing the aggregate relationship between power shifts and war,[9] but in my view it does not fully capture the nuances of preventive logic.[10] Perceptions of the magnitude and even the direction of a power shift may vary across states and across leaders, and these perceptions are critical in assessing behavior.[11]

Another conceptual problem is the persistent tendency, despite ample clarification in the literature for at least two decades, for scholars to confuse prevention with preemption, or to deliberately treat the two concepts as interchangeable.[12] This is not helpful. Prevention and preemption are each forms of better-now-than-latter logic, but they are responses to different threats involving different time horizons and calling for different strategic responses. Preemption involves striking now in the anticipation of an imminent adversary attack, with the aim of securing first-mover advantages. Prevention is a response to a future threat rather than an immediate threat. It is driven by the anticipation of an adverse power shift and the fear of the consequences, including the deterioration of one's relative military position and bargaining power and the risk of war—or of extensive concessions necessary to avoid war—under less favorable circumstances later. The incentive is to forestall the power shift by blocking the rise of the adversary while the opportunity is still available.[13]

Most preemptors do not want war but believe it is imminent and unavoidable. Preventers want war in the short-term to avoid the risk of a worse war in the

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[7] This raises some interesting issues in the philosophical analysis of causation, including ''causal preemption'' and ''preemptive prevention'' (Collins 2000).

[8] If the initiator's perception of an imminent attack is mistaken, the sources of the misperception and the strategy of preemption that followed take on greater causal weight.

[9] Lemke (2003) finds no relationship between power shifts and the onset of war. Weisiger (2008) concurs, but finds that wars involving power shifts on the eve of war are longer and more intense than wars that do not involve such power shifts.

[10] Aggregate studies of power shifts and war need to give greater attention to the relative weight of different dimensions of power. The Correlates of War Project's summary measure (Bremer 1980)—which gives equal weight to military, economic, and demographic indicators of power—may not be appropriate for testing propositions on preventive war. My hypothesis is that in decisions regarding the resort to a preventive war strategy in response to an adverse power shift, leaders are most frequently concerned with the military dimension, occasionally concerned with the economic dimension, and rarely concerned with the demographic dimension. One advantage of case study approaches is that they can investigate how various political leaders evaluated different elements of shifting power.

[11] Prior to Munich, for example, French and British leaders had diametrically opposed perceptions of the relative balance of power and how it was changing. French leaders believed that Germany was weaker than France and Britain, but growing stronger, while British leaders believed that Germany was already stronger but that its lead would not last, particularly if Britain began to rearm. The French were driven by better-now-than-later logic to prefer a strong stand against Germany at Munich, but only with British support, while the British were led by better-later-than-now logic to prefer a strategy of appeasement to buy time for rearmament (Ripsman and Levy 2007).

[12] The distinguished scholars Gaddis (2004), Quester (2000), Schroeder (2002), and Trachtenberg (2007) each use preemption and prevention interchangeably. A useful RAND study (Mueller et al. 2006, xii) argues that prevention and preemption are driven by ''similar logic,'' and subsumes them both under the larger category of ''anticipatory attack.''

[13] For similar conceptualizations see Betts (1982, 145), Freedman (2004, 85–89), Huntington (1957, 360), Levy (1987), Renshon (2006, chapter 1), and Silverstone (2007, chapter 1), Van Evera (1999, 76), Walzer (1977, 76).

future. Preventers often initiate war, but they sometimes attempt to provoke the adversary into initiating a war so as to secure for themselves the diplomatic and domestic political advantages of appearing as the defender.[14] The classic example of preemption is the Israeli initiation of the 1967 war (Oren 2002). The classic example of prevention is the Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981.[15] Thus the Bush doctrine of preemption is based on the logic of prevention, though the causal role of preventive logic in the complex processes leading to the 2003 Iraq war has yet to be established.[16]

The distinction between preemption and prevention is important for many reasons. Historically, prevention is far more common than preemption.[17] Theoretically, the conditions under which states adopt each strategy are quite different.[18] Legally, preemption is far easier to justify than is prevention because imminent threats, unlike temporally distant threats, preclude alternative strategic responses that take time to implement (Doyle 2008; Walzer 1977). In terms of policy, optimal strategic responses to threats of prevention differ from those for preemption. As Betts (1982, 144–145) argues, ''Countermobilization is the best way to deter an enemy contemplating preventive attack and the worst way to deter one considering preemption.''

Even if we limit the concept of prevention to forestalling future threats, we need to specify what kinds of threats qualify. How broadly prevention is defined helps to shape assessments of both the historical frequency and the effectiveness of preventive war strategies, which in turn can have an enormous impact on policy debates that invoke history for support. Many critics of the Bush Doctrine implicitly adopt a narrow definition of prevention and argue that the emphasis on preventive logic marks a new departure in American foreign policy, while the administration's supporters adopt a broader definition and often emphasize continuity with a deeply rooted historical tradition. This raises the concern that policy arguments that seek justification from history are often shaped more by definition than by history, and that definitions themselves are shaped by policy preferences rather than by their analytic utility (Levy 2007).

Turning to more serious scholarly analyses, Renshon (2006, chapter 1) defines prevention as ''an action… fought to forestall a grave national security threat,'' which he defines to include the loss of status or prestige as well as a decline in relative military power.[19] Gaddis (2004, 16–22), while less explicit, also uses an expansive conception of ''preemption,'' which he uses interchangeably with prevention. He describes as preemptive John Adams' response to cross-border incursions from Spanish Florida and Andrew Jackson's policy of using military force on the vulnerable western frontier before specific threats materialized. He also refers to a ''succession of preemptive interventions'' by the United States to

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[14] Lebow (1981) captures this in his concept of a ''justification of hostility'' crisis. In 1914, for example, German leaders feared the rising power of Russia and wanted a war before power shifted further, but they did not want to mobilize first, for fear of appearing as the aggressor. Once Russia mobilized Germany then struck first to gain first-mover military advantages. See Albertini (1952–1957) and Fischer (1967).

[15] Other wars commonly attributed to preventive logic include Prussia in the Seven Years War (1756–1763), Japan in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Germany in World War I, and Japan in the 1941–1945 Pacific War (Copeland 2000; Mueller et al. 2006; Vagts 1956; Van Evera 1999).

[16] The Bush Administration's rhetorical emphasis on preemption is probably explained by its recognition of the problematic legal basis of prevention, though it is also conceivable that they (like many scholars) did not appreciate the analytic distinction.

[17] As Reiter (1995) notes, ''preemptive wars almost never happen.''

[18] States in relative decline are most likely to adopt preventive strategies when they expect that a power transition is virtually certain, that the adversary will have a substantial advantage, that the adversary is hostile and revisionist, and that a future war is likely. For these and other hypotheses see Copeland (2000), Ripsman and Levy (2007), and Van Evera (1999).

[19] Buchanan and Keohane (2004), whose aims are more normative, define the preventive use of force as ''the initiation of military action in anticipation of harmful actions that are neither presently occurring nor immediately impending.''

contain political instability in Central and South America in the early 20th century. He argues that ''even the prospect of power vacuums invited preemption,'' and that ''concerns about 'failed' or 'derelict' states, then, are nothing new in the history of United States foreign relations, nor are strategies of preemption in dealing with them.''

Gaddis's (2004) argument, with its emphasis on defensively motivated expansion driven by the security dilemma and a worst-case analysis of potential threats, provides a useful counter to interpretations that emphasize a more offensively oriented expansionism, though more extensive testing of these rival interpretations is warranted. It is not useful, however, to classify such actions as preventive. That would lump U.S. interventions on the Western frontier in the 19th century and in Central and South America early in the 20th century in the same category as Israel's 1981 strike against Iraq's nuclear reactor or Germany's strategy for a war in 1914 before Russia grew too strong. Similarly, Mueller et al. (2006, 182–187) go too far in classifying the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada as preventive (to forestall the establishment of a Soviet military base).

Some define prevention even more broadly to include any development that might leave the state worse off in the future. Taylor (1954, 166), for example, argues that each great power war in the 1848–1918 period ''started as a preventive war.'' The problem with expansive conceptions of prevention is that they incorporate too many different things under a single category and, in the extreme, result in nearly all wars being classified as preventive. This is a classic case of ''conceptual stretching'' (Sartori 1970). It weakens the discriminatory power of our analytic concepts and complicates efforts to construct an explanatory theory that applies to all cases within a given category.[20]

It makes a difference, for explanatory theory, whether the use of military force is driven by a fear of imminent attack, fear of a deteriorating power position that might leave one vulnerable in several years, fear of political instability on one's borders, or a fear of a loss of prestige or status in the international system. Thus we need different concepts to describe these behaviors. With regard to Renshon's (2006) inclusion of an anticipated loss of both prestige and of relative power in his definition of prevention, I agree that prestige can reinforce power, but would argue that it is only by analytically distinguishing between these two variables that we can assess their separate causal effects.[21]

For these reasons I focus narrowly on the perception of threat deriving from changing power differentials and on a military response to the threat, and exclude other sources of better-now-than-later logic from the category of prevention.[22] I am not necessarily suggesting that these other factors have a smaller causal impact than do negative power shifts and preventive logic. That is an empirical question, and one that can be answered only by first analytically distinguishing among various causal variables.

Preventive logic can lead to a limited military strike as well as to an all-out war.[23] Whether a limited strike remains limited or escalates to war depends not

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[20] Excessively narrow definitions, which are less common, also strip the concept of much of its discriminating power by reducing it to a null set. Wolfers (1962, 153), for example, concluded that ''there seems to be no case in history in which a country started a preventive war on the grounds of security.''

[21] Press (2005) demonstrates the utility of distinguishing between power and reputation by showing that states are influenced more by adversary capabilities and interests than by its credibility in responding to past threats.

[22] My concept of the preventive motivation for war excludes ''preventive diplomacy,'' ''preventive deployment,'' and ''preventive intervention,'' which generally aim to avert humanitarian disasters. I also exclude nonmilitary actions to forestall economic or military decline, such as economic restructuring. Covert actions to degrade adversary military capabilities are preventively motivated, but I prefer to distinguish them from preventively motivated strikes and wars undertaken by a state's organized military forces, which is a defining element of war (Vasquez 1993, chapter 2).

[23] Limited preventive strikes and the importance of relative power were key themes in Levy (1987), but Renshon (2006, 148–151) mischaracterizes that discussion.

only on the actions of the preventer, but also on those of the target. Presumably the initiator anticipates the target's likely response and incorporates it into its initial decision calculus. It might launch a limited military strike if it expects no military response and refrain from military action if it expects a major military response. Israel's anticipation that Iraq would not respond to a limited Israeli strike contributed to its decision to launch a surgical strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 (Nakdimon 1987; Perlmutter et al. 2003). In contrast, the U.S. anticipation that North Korea would probably respond to a limited strike against its nuclear facilities in 1994 with an all-out attack on South Korea was a major factor in the U.S. decision against military action (Sigal 1997; Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci 2004). Similarly, India was deterred from launching a surgical strike against Pakistan's nuclear facilities by its belief that Pakistan would respond in kind and that the radioactive fallout from an attack on India's nuclear reactors would be enormously costly (Ganguly and Hagerty 2005, 55–57; Perkovich 1999).

The preventive motivation for war, usually associated with power transitions involving the overtaking of a declining leader by a rising challenger, can also arise in response to more limited power shifts. One example is a ''rapid approach'' that levels off short of a power transition (Wayman 1996). Another is the challenger's crossing a particular threshold of military power, leading to a step-level power shift. While such limited power shifts are presumably less threatening than those leading to a reversal of power relations, they can still trigger military responses, even in a non-nuclear context. The Czech/Russian arms sale to Egypt was a major factor leading to Israel's preventive motivation for war in the 1956 Sinai Campaign (Levy and Gochal 2001–2002). The anticipated completion of Russia's trans-Siberian railroad and its expected enhancement of Russia's power projection capabilities in East Asia contributed to Japan's decision for war in 1904 (Patrikeeff and Shukman 2007).

The crossing of the nuclear threshold is the most consequential manifestation of a step-level power shift. In addition to their role in triggering Israel's attack against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 and possibly the American war in Iraq in 2003, fears that an adversary was about to acquire nuclear weapons led to serious considerations of a preventively motivated military strike by India against Pakistan in the early 1980s (Ganguly and Hagerty 2005; Perkovich 1999), by the United States against North Korea in 1994 (Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci 2004), and, to a lesser extent, by the United States against the Soviet Union and then against China in the 1950s and 1960s (Silverstone 2007; Trachtenberg 2007).

The preventive logic associated with an anticipated power shift that falls short of a complete power transition is the same that underlies any power shift—the expectation that a decline in relative military capabilities will lead to a commensurate decline in its bargaining leverage, leaving the state less able to defend its interests, less able to defend its allies, and compelled to make unwanted concessions in the future. This, and not the fear of a power transition per se, was what motivated the United States in the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis, and was a major factor for some (but not all) U.S. decision-makers in their support of the 2003 Iraq war.

While the literature on prevention focuses primarily on dyadic power shifts, third states can also play an important role. First, the target of the threat posed by the rising power may be one's allies rather than oneself, as suggested by the U.S.-Iraqi case in 2003. Second, the source of the threat may not be the primary adversary alone, but instead a coalition of states. Frederick the Great, anticipating the formation of a hostile coalition of Austria, Russia, and France, attacked Austria in 1756.[24] In 1914, German leaders never doubted their ability to defeat

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[24] Anderson (1966, 34) calls this ''the most famous preventive war in history.''

their rising Russian adversary in a bilateral war, but they feared the implications of Russia's rise for Germany's ability to defeat Russia and France together in a two-front war by 1917.

In elaborating on the concept of prevention, I have focused more on the perceptions and decisions of the preventer than on the behavior of the target. This reflects my working assumption—which needs to be explored empirically—that power shifts often involve relatively little bargaining between the declining and rising state, precisely because it is difficult to reach a negotiated settlement under conditions of shifting power. As I argued before (Levy 1987, 96), the declining state hesitates to accept a settlement, even one involving substantial concessions, knowing that the rising state can repudiate any agreement once it becomes dominant. Each knows there is nothing the rising state can do to assure its adversary that it will refrain from using its new power to overturn a settlement, so that current agreements are not enforceable. The only concessions the declining state would be likely to accept are those that place limits on growth of the rising state's power, which the latter is unlikely to grant. This argument has been stated more formally and rigorously in the bargaining model of war, and is now well known as the "commitment problem" (Fearon 1995; Powell 2006; Wagner 2000).

Let me end this section by emphasizing that I do not attach any particular normative evaluation to this definition of preventive war strategies. "Preventive" does not necessarily mean "defensive" or normatively justifiable. If state *A* embarks on an aggressive war and conquers territory from *B*, *B* then gradually begins to build up its arms, and *A* then strikes at *B* to forestall *B*'s further rise in power and any potential threat to *A*'s new territories, I would label the motivation preventive but not necessarily as defensive.[25]

Perceptions of an impending power shift might also lead through preventive logic to shape the timing of a fundamentally aggressive war. The German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 is one example. German policy in World War I is another, regardless of whether one views Germany as seeking a war to maintain a favorable status quo in Europe (Albertini 1952–1957) or to overturn the status quo and achieve hegemony over Europe (Fischer 1967, 1975, 470; Lieber 2007; Mombauer 2001). In either case, the rise of Russian power in combination with the threat of a two-front war in Europe made it a "now or never" situation for Germany. German leaders hoped that a local war in the Balkans would break up the Franco-Russian alliance and precipitate a diplomatic realignment in Europe, but they were willing to fight a continental war if necessary to block the rise of Russia while the opportunity was still available. Mombauer (2001, 108) describes German policy as preventive "not in the sense of preempting an attack from one of Germany's possible future enemies, but of preventing a situation in which Germany would no longer herself be able to launch an attack successfully" (in pursuit of its revisionist aims).[26]

Democracy and Preventive War

Prior to 2002, scholars commonly argued, often in quite unconditional terms, that democracies rarely if ever fought wars for preventive reasons—because institutional constraints and domestic political pressures blocked democratic political leaders from adopting such strategies, and because such wars were morally abhorrent and contrary to the collective identity of democratic states. After the central role of preventive logic in the Bush Administration's National Security

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[25] Thus I dissent from Mueller et al.'s (2006, xii) statement that prevention and preemption are "offensive strategies carried out for defensive reasons."

[26] I thank Keir Lieber for his guidance on the new historiography of World War I.

Strategy and in its primary rationale for the 2003 Iraq War, I suspect that fewer people would make that argument today. Still, there has been little empirical work on this question. After summarizing the theoretical arguments advanced in support of the proposition that democracies rarely if ever fight ''preventive wars,'' and specifying their testable implications, I turn to the historical evidence.[27]

Assertions about democratic aversion to strategies of prevention go back to the early Cold War period, when the anticipated end of the U.S. nuclear monopoly prompted scholars, public intellectuals, and policy makers to debate the wisdom of a strategy of preventive war. Morgenthau (1948, 155) argued that preventive war was ''abhorrent to democratic public opinion'' because of the moral condemnation of war in the West, and a year later George Kennan (in Gaddis 1982, 49n) wrote that ''[a] democratic society cannot plan a preventive war.'' Kissinger (1955, 416) argued that ''there has always been an air of unreality about a program [of preventive war] so contrary to the sense of the country and the constitutional limits within which American foreign policy must be conducted.'' Brodie (1965, 237) saw ''a powerful and rigid barrier, largely on moral grounds, to American planning of preventive war.'' These attitudes were shared by most U.S. policy makers, at least through the 1950s (Silverstone 2007).

Among contemporary international relations theorists, the claim that democracies are averse to preventive military strategies is most closely linked to Schweller (1992, 238–248), who argued that ''only nondemocratic regimes wage preventive wars against rising opponents. Declining democratic states... do not exercise this option.'' Schweller based his argument primarily upon the expected costs of war. He drew on Kant's ([1795]1977, 438) argument that because ''the consent of the citizens [in republican regimes] is required to decide whether there should be war or not,'' the people will ''hesitate to start such an evil game.'' State leaders anticipate this and refrain from all but the most necessary wars. Given his emphasis on the costs of war, Schweller (1992, 248) conceded that democracies might fight low-cost preventive wars, which he operationalized as wars fought against weaker opponents, and qualified his argument to state that democracies do not adopt preventive war strategies in response to ''power shifts between states of roughly equal strength.''[28]

Schweller also emphasized the constraining role of democratic political cultures, which induce lack of a martial spirit, the resistance to universal peacetime conscription, a general unpreparedness for military action, and the lack of flexibility and decisiveness that are necessary for the practice of *realpolitik*. Because of these cultural and institutional factors, democratic leaders face more serious obstacles than do autocratic leaders in gaining support for war where there is no immediate threat to the national interest and where the primary issue is the rising power of an adversary, even a hostile adversary. Thus Schweller (1992, 242–243) argued that to gain support for war, democratic political leaders must demonstrate ''evidence of a clear and present danger,'' which generally requires ''several provocations.''[29] This echoed Brodie's (1965, 39) earlier argument that for the American democracy ''war is generally unpopular and the public mood inclines to support really bold action only in response to great anger or great fright. The fright must be something more than a sudden new rise in [the adversary's] capability.''

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[27] This section draws on Levy and Gochal (2001–2002).

[28] This was an important qualification, but one rarely acknowledged by those citing Schweller's (1992) argument that democracies never, or almost never, fight preventive wars (Elman 2000, 92; Lynn-Jones 1996, xxxii; Mansfield and Snyder 1995, 21; Walt 1999, 40).

[29] The requirement of a present danger raises the question of time horizons, and whether democratic leaders have shorter time horizons than do autocratic leaders because of the former's electoral accountability. Political scientists give little systematic attention to time horizons, but see Toft (2006) and Streich and Levy (2007).

This brief review suggests two general explanations for why democracies might be disinclined—or at least less inclined than autocratic states—to respond to rising powers with a strategy of preventive war. One focuses on domestic political constraints and on political leaders' response to or anticipation of public opposition to preventively motivated wars. Public resistance can be driven by cost aversion, casualty aversion, moral concerns, short time horizons, or other considerations. The other explanation focuses on political leaders themselves—their conceptions of democratic political identity and their moral concerns about preventive action. Leaders might also oppose preventive strategies for a variety of strategic or diplomatic reasons, but those should not significantly differentiate them from nondemocratic leaders.

These two explanations generate two sets of questions that guide our historical cases: (i) Did domestic publics oppose strategies of preventive war, and did public opposition, actual or anticipated, influence political leaders? (ii) Did concerns about the morality of preventive war, or its appropriateness for a democratic state, significantly influence the judgments and decisions of political leaders? Or was any opposition to prevention driven by calculations of costs and benefits defined in terms of material interests?

A third question guiding this study is more descriptive: what is the empirical validity of the unconditional proposition that democracies never resort to preventive war strategies, or of the qualified proposition that they do so only if they expect low costs, defined as those against states of approximately equal military capabilities.[30]

Given the relatively unconditional formulation of the common argument that democracies do not fight ''preventive wars,'' or at least not against states of roughly equal power, a few contrary cases would be sufficient to disconfirm the argument (Dion 1998). Toward this end I examine one anticipated power shift that led to war (Israel's Sinai Campaign in 1956) and one that led to a limited military strike (the Israeli attack against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981). I also look at the United States in both the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War and (more briefly) in the 2003 Iraq War, focusing not on the complex question of the role of the preventive motivation in the causes of each war, but instead on the degree of domestic support for a preventive military strategy. Further evidence bearing on the causal propositions that domestic constraints and leaders' moral concerns inhibit preventive strategies by democratic states can be extracted from cases of nonwars, and with that aim in mind I examine the U.S.-North Korean nuclear crisis of 1994. A full treatment of each of these cases is not possible in this study, but even a cursory look at the evidence provides considerable leverage for our theoretical propositions. I examine only democratic preventers and thus cannot make comparisons between democratic and authoritarian states in their responses to adverse power shifts.

Israel's 1956 Sinai Campaign

The 1955 Soviet/Czech arms sale to Egypt was an important trigger for Israel's 1956 Sinai Campaign against Egypt.[31] At a time when Israeli leaders perceived continuing hostility from the Arab world, as evidenced by persistent armed infiltration into Israel from Arab territories and Egypt's ongoing interference with

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[30] The probabilistic proposition that democracies are less likely than are authoritarian states to adopt preventive military strategies against rising adversaries (Kydd 1997, 150) is more difficult to analyze, and I save it for another time.

[31] I treat this case in more detail in Levy and Gochal (2001–2002). Useful sources include Bar-On (1994), Ben-Gurion (1990), Dayan (1966), Golani (1998), Kyle (1991), Maoz (2006, chapter 2), Morris (1993), Oren (1992), Renshon (2006, chapter 2), Shimshoni (1988), Shlaim (2001, chapter 4), Tal (2001), and Troen and Shemesh (1990).

Israeli or Israel-bound shipping through the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba, Israeli leaders feared that the full integration of these armaments into the Egyptian arsenal would lead to a significant shift in the dyadic balance of military power and provide Egypt with a qualitative as well as quantitative advantage. They also feared that Egyptian Presdient Gamal Abd'el Nasser's pan-Arabic ideology would lead to the strengthening of the Arab coalition against a diplomatically isolated Israel.

Israel's Sinai Campaign was a strategy of preventive war to avert an impending power transition in a high-threat environment (Levy and Gochal 2001–2002).[32] The anticipated power shift and the preventive motivation it generated constituted a necessary condition for war. While the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping and the armed infiltration of Fedayeen imposed enormous economic and social costs on Israeli society, they were tolerable as long as the survival of the Israeli state was ensured. These factors would not have led to war in the absence of the anticipated shift in the balance of power. The armed infiltration and the naval blockade were a constant reminder, however, of the existential threat posed by Arab states that refused to acknowledge Israel's right to exist. Along with Nasser's belligerent rhetoric, they generated a widely-shared belief among Israeli elites that Nasser was implacably hostile and that a second round of war was inevitable, possibly within a year (Ben-Gurion 1983, 273, 294, 301, 317, 319, 325; Shlaim 2001, 155).

These factors were not jointly sufficient for war, however, because Israeli leaders perceived that war would have been too costly in the absence of French and British participation, which Israel required to avoid diplomatic isolation, provide air cover for her civilian population, and eliminate the risk of British intervention on the side of Jordan in an Israeli-Jordanian war (Golani 1998, 21; Morris 1993, 277). Thus British and French participation was another necessary condition for war.

Although the combination of the unfavorable shift in power, grievances over the maritime blockade and armed infiltration, perceptions of the inevitability of a second round of war, and assurances of British and French intervention made an Israeli decision for war very likely, that decision was not inevitable, at least not in the fall of 1956. An important contributory cause of the war was Israel's limited success in securing armaments from the West—France and the United States in particular—to counterbalance the growing Egyptian arsenal. If war was inevitable, if the passage of time favored Egypt and its Arab allies, and if the continued search for Western arms would not work to counter the deteriorating military balance, Israel had run out of options, preventive logic became compelling, and Israeli leaders turned to war as what they saw as the only alternative.

Although perceptions of the inevitability of war and the inability to secure adequate armaments were enormously important contributory conditions for the Sinai campaign, it would go too far to say that either of these was a necessary condition for war. If Israelis had perceived Nasser as merely likely, rather than certain, to initiate war within a few years, or if Israel had been more successful in securing higher quantities of superior Western armaments, the likelihood of the Sinai campaign would have been reduced but not eliminated, particularly given independent British and French incentives for war (Tal 2001).[33]

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[32] Israeli revisionist historians argue that the arms sale was a pretext for a war that Israel wanted to expand its territory and bolster its position for future negotiations (Golani 1998).

[33] After Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, France and Britain were eager to recover their economic stakes in the canal and reestablish their status in the region (Renshon 2006, chapter 2).

The 1981 Israeli Strike against Iraq[34]

Israel's raid against Iraq's Osiraq nuclear reactor on June 6, 1981 is probably history's clearest case for a preventive strike driven by the fear of a shift in the balance of power. Israeli leaders believed that Iraq, led by a hostile and undeterrable Saddam Hussein, would soon acquire nuclear weapons that would undercut Israel's (unofficial) nuclear deterrent and, in conjunction with Arab states' decisive quantitative military superiority over Israel, threaten the existence of the Israeli state. As Ariel Sharon (quoted in Feldman 1982, 122) stated, ''For us it is not a question of balance of terror but a question of survival.''

Israeli concerns about a possible Iraqi nuclear capability date to the mid-1970s. Iraq's nuclear program accelerated with Saddam Hussein's rise to power, and the 1970s saw a fourfold increase in Iraq's military arsenal, including the acquisition of bombers that could be equipped with nuclear warheads capable of reaching Israel. Israeli fears were exacerbated by Saddam's belligerent rhetoric, by a number of technical factors that led Israeli leaders to conclude that the main purpose of Osiraq's reactor was to build a nuclear weapon, and by the termination of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1980. Prime Minister Menachem Begin and other Israeli leaders believed that Iraq could develop nuclear weapons by 1985 and perhaps sooner (Evron 1994, 28; Feldman 1984, 118; Nakdimon 1987, 115; Perlmutter et al. 2003; Snyder 1983, 581).

The debate in Israel was not so much about whether Iraq was developing a nuclear weapons capacity, but whether preventive action or deterrence provided the best policy response.[35] A March 1980 report to Begin emphasized the risks of military action. It would alienate world opinion, especially if it resulted in radioactive contamination of Iraqi civilians; violate international norms against attacking nuclear reactors, which could lead to severe international sanctions; unify Arab and Islamic opinion against Israel and possibly even provoke a Soviet-assisted regional war; and alienate the United States, leading to a reduction in American aid and possibly to an increase in Arab-American cooperation (Nakdimon 1987, 114).

A deterrence strategy was also problematic. One lesson many Israeli leaders learned from the 1967 and 1973 wars was that Israeli conventional forces could no longer deter an Arab invasion. The balance of power had deteriorated, the Arabs now had a five-to-one quantitative superiority over Israel, and Soviet influence in the region was growing. In addition, Israel had lost confidence that American power provided a reliable guarantee of Israeli security. Israeli leaders believed that the role of their nuclear capability in enhancing conventional deterrence would be neutralized by Iraq's acquisition of nuclear weapons, leaving Israel to contend with an overwhelming Arab quantitative conventional superiority. In addition, geography imposed limits on Israel's ability to disperse and conceal its retaliatory force and thus to assure a second-strike capability, and the concentration of Israeli population in a few major population centers left the Israeli population extremely vulnerable to even a limited nuclear strike. Consequently, any balance of terror in the Middle East might be far less stable than the U.S.-Soviet balance (Feldman 1982, 124). Finally, the economic costs of maintaining an adequate deterrent were quite substantial.[36]

In addition, Saddam's highly belligerent, anti-Israeli rhetoric fueled Israeli beliefs that Iraqi plans for a nuclear program were driven by a fanatical ideology,

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[34] This section draws on Levy and Gochal (2004). See also Aronson and Brosh (1992), Feldman (1982, 1984), McCormack (1996), Nakdimon (1987), Perlmutter et al. (2003), Renshon (2006), and Snyder (1983).

[35] The diplomatic option had already failed, after Israel unsuccessfully attempted to persuade France to cease its support for the Iraqi nuclear program and to prevent the termination of IAEA inspections of Osiraq.

[36] Formal models of bargaining under shifting power often neglect the economic costs of deterrence as an alternative to fighting. For an exception see Powell (2006, 192–194).

not defensive Iraqi security concerns. Saddam's decision to attack Iran in 1980 further reinforced the image of Saddam as a risk-acceptant, possibly irrational, and ultimately undeterrable leader. Many Israeli leaders thought it highly likely that Saddam would use the bomb once he acquired it. The consequences would be catastrophic, especially in the eyes of Begin, who was more preoccupied than most with images of the Holocaust (Renshon 2006, 51–52; Silver 1984, 65). As Perlmutter et al. (2003, 70) argue, "For Begin the Jewish historical tragedy and the trauma—personal and collective—of the Holocaust were clearly the triggers that made him decide to annihilate the Iraqi reactor..."

Other Israeli leaders dissented from this view and placed more confidence in deterrence. Shimon Peres, one of the architects of the Israeli nuclear program and the leading opposition candidate in the Israeli elections of 1981, opposed any attack on Osiraq. As he explained in a 10 May 1981 letter to Begin (reprinted in Perlmutter et al. 2003, 59), the international response would leave Israel isolated "like a tree in the desert." The letter only strengthened Begin's determination to proceed with a military strike, because it reinforced his beliefs that a Labor government would not act forcefully to deal with the threat. Begin concluded that he had to act while he had the political power to do so (Snyder 1983, 584), since Peres was leading in the polls at the time. Begin believed that the negative reaction to an air raid could be minimized by striking before Osiraq became operational (perhaps mid-July), and thus before the danger of radioactive contamination of Iraqi civilians, which would trigger an international outcry.[37] These differences over the diplomatic costs of an air strike were the primary dividing line between hawks and doves (Mueller et al. 2006, 215).

The formal report of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1981) explained the air strike as a response to the "imminent realization" of Iraqi plans to acquire a nuclear weapon, Iraq's continued insistence on a declared state of war with Israel and "persistent denial of Israel's right to exist," and the failure of diplomatic efforts to prevent foreign assistance to the Iraqi nuclear program. The fact that the attack was justified to the public in terms of preventive logic runs contrary to the argument that democratic publics will not support preventive wars in the face of future threats.

After the air strike, the Israeli government emphasized that Iraq was a unique case and that Israel would not necessarily adopt a preventive strategy if Egypt or some other less belligerent Arab state were to embark on a weapons-capable nuclear program (Snyder 1983, 582). Israeli officials stressed that Israel was willing to use force only against what Defense Minister Sharon deemed "confrontation states" or otherwise "fanatical" Arab regimes (quoted in Feldman 1982, 122). Israel had not responded to Egypt's development of a nuclear program (though it did use covert operations in the 1950s), but that program, unlike Iraq's, was not currently capable of developing nuclear weapons. Moreover, Egypt, unlike Iraq, had recognized Israel's right to exist.

To summarize, Israel's military raid on Osiriq was driven by its anticipation of an adverse power shift and its implications for the future, not by existing conflicts of interests, grievances, or misperceptions. In the absence of Iraq's nuclear program, Israel would not have attacked Iraq in June 1981, so the anticipated power shift and resulting preventive motivation constituted a necessary condition for military action. But it was not quite sufficient. Contrary to a "pure power" model of prevention, perceptions of adversary intentions played an important role, as did individual-level belief systems. The October 1980 decision for the air strike passed by only a narrow margin (10–6) in the Cabinet, with numerous

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[37] To the extent that moral issues were raised, they worked not to inhibit a preventive strike, but rather to strike earlier rather than later. Some argue that Begin saw a moral duty in destroying the reactor (Renshon 2006).

influential political and military leaders opposed (Mueller et al. 2006, 215; Perl-
mutter et al. 2003, 71), and one can certainly imagine a different outcome.

The question of the causal impact of preventive motivation on the U.S. decision
to go to war against Iraq in January 1991 is an interesting and important one.
The fear that Saddam's Iraq might acquire nuclear weapons and the temptation
to destroy that capability before it became a threat to U.S. interests and stability
in the Middle East is clearly one of many factors contributing to the U.S. deci-
sion for military intervention. Numerous U.S. officials explicitly used preventive
logic in their arguments for confronting Saddam.[38] Establishing the relative
causal weight of this factor is, however, a more time consuming task than is
possible here. Instead, I focus on the role of the preventive motivation in the
mobilization of public support for the war. This issue bears directly on the argu-
ment that democratic publics do not support wars on preventive grounds, and
that they punish political leaders who embark on such wars.[39]

   The first Bush Administration's public justification for American military inter-
vention in the Persian Gulf region varied widely from the initial stages of the
crisis in August of 1990 through operation Desert Shield and then Desert Storm,
ranging from arguments about a moral crusade to those based on economic or
strategic interest. This suggests that the administration was searching for the
optimum way to sell military action to the American public and the Congress
(Baker 1995, 273, 333), at a time when the public was evenly split on the merits
of going to war to drive Iraq out of Kuwait and when Bush's approval ratings
were falling (Mueller 1994, 29). Reinforcing the search for an optimal rationale
was the warning from Bush's chief pollsters that too many arguments for the war
actually confused the public (Freedman and Karsh 1993, 222).

   From the beginning of the crisis in early August through an October 16
speech by Bush, administration officials stressed the immoral nature of Iraqi
aggression. Only six days later Bush warned that ''our jobs, our way of life,
our own freedom would all suffer if control of the world's great oil supplies
fell into the hands of that one man, Saddam Hussein.'' On October 29 Secre-
tary of State Baker emphasized Saddam's contempt for the norms of civilized
warfare, referring to the use of hostages as human shields. Baker repeated
the emphasis on American hostages in his meeting with Congressional leaders
(and Bush) the next day, but the argument fell flat (Freedman and Karsh
1993, 223–224).

   Two weeks later, on 13 November, Baker reverted to the economic argument.
He emphasized the importance of oil for the economic stability of the country,
the industrial world, and for the ''average American citizen,'' concluding ''it's
jobs'' (Baker 1995, 336; Freedman and Karsh 1993, 214–215, 224). This argu-
ment also failed to elicit much popular support, and Bush's approval rating con-
tinued to decline (*Gallup Poll* Monthly, cited in Mueller 1994, 193–194). The
limited appeal of the economic argument and Bush's declining popularity were
connected. Most people believed that the primary U.S. motivation was defend-
ing oil supplies, but regarded that as an insufficient argument for war, and the

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[38] Vice President Quayle frequently argued that ''the administration's ultimate objective should be to defang
Saddam Hussein's military machine, especially to destroy his weapons of mass destruction'' (US News and World
Report 1992, 140). Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney argued before Congress in September of 1990 that ''the
removal of Iraq's incipient nuclear capability was a long established objective of US policy.'' CIA director William
Webster stated in October that the administration would have ''no real confidence that the area will ever be secure
again'' unless Saddam were ''disassociated from his weapons of mass destruction'' (Freedman and Karsh 1993,
220).
[39] This section draws on Levy and Gochal (2004).

president's popularity suffered as a result (Freedman and Karsh 1993, 224; Mueller 1994, 39, 42).[40]

The rationale that did elicit more support for American intervention was the threat of an Iraqi nuclear capability. A CBS/*New York Times* poll of 13–15 November (cited in Mueller 1994, 255; Table #134) showed that 54% of the respondents believed that stopping Saddam Hussein ''from developing nuclear weapons'' was a ''good enough reason to take military action'' in Iraq, as compared to 31% describing protecting ''the source of much of the world's oil'' as a ''good enough'' reason, and 35% for restoring the Kuwaiti government and defending Saudi Arabia.[41]

This revelation quickly led to a change in the administration's rhetoric. In a 22 November speech President Bush presented the new rationalization for American military involvement in the Persian Gulf. He said that ''Those who would measure the timetable for Saddam Hussein's atomic weapons program in years may be seriously underestimating the reality of the situation and the gravity of the threat.... No one knows precisely when this dictator may acquire atomic weapons.'' Bush acknowledged some uncertainty about Saddam's future capabilities and intentions, but concluded by saying that ''We know this for sure: He has never possessed a weapon that he hasn't used'' (in Freedman and Karsh 1993, 224). Bush's remarks about the danger of an Iraq armed with nuclear weapons and the bellicose nature of Hussein were further reinforced by the analogies he made with the failure of appeasement in the 1930s, thus linking Saddam with Hitler (Freedman and Karsh 1993, 222; Wayne 1993, 39). Other administration officials followed Bush's lead.

The administration's change in emphasis was successful in increasing the public's support for U.S. military action in the Persian Gulf crisis. Polls consistently showed a near monotonic drop in Bush's approval rating (and assessments of his handling of the crisis) from late August 1990 through 15 November (immediately after Baker's ''way of life speech''), and a sharp upward bump at the very end of November and beginning of December (the next polling period after Bush's ''atomic'' speech).[42] The increases in approval ratings were in the range of 4–7%, with increases in the range of 11–15% for questions relating to support for the initiation of war. As the US News (1992, 179) team concludes, ''...concern over Saddam's potential for nuclear weapons was a real 'hot button' issue with the American people. Bush, Baker, and Cheney would quickly conclude that it would be Iraq's putative nuclear threat that would enable them to forge a domestic consensus for war in Iraq.''

The evidence is compelling. Behavior in the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf crisis suggests that the American public believed, by a considerable margin, that the threat that Iraq might acquire nuclear weapons was the most persuasive argument for supporting military intervention against Iraq. U.S. political leaders soon emphasized that threat in their efforts to mobilize the American public behind a major war effort. This support for the war effort was not based on the belief that war would be quick and costless. In a January 8–12, 1991 *Los Angles Times* poll asking about possible justifications for a ''*major* war'' (my emphasis), 54% of Americans believed that ''the United States is justified in getting involved in a major war to destroy Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons,'' while 36% believed that such an objective did not justify a major

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[40] Subsequently, Baker (1995, 337) admitted that he severely overstated the importance of oil.

[41] Similarly, a Gallup poll taken on the 15th and 16th of November showed that over 70% of the respondents believed that preventing Iraq's ability to threaten the region with biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons was a ''good reason to go to war,'' as opposed to 57–60% for preventing Iraq ''from controlling a larger share of Mideast oil and threatening the U.S. economy'' (Mueller 1994, 254, Table #133).

[42] See Mueller's (1994) Polls #1 (180), #8 (193), #10 (195), #11 (195), #12 (196), #13 (197), #22 (200), #33 (200), #34 (201), #40 (208), and #57 (219).

war (*Los Angeles Times* poll, in Mueller 1994, 253). This evidence runs strongly contrary to the argument that democratic publics will not tolerate preventive military action and withhold their support from political leaders who initiate it, regardless of whether Bush Administration officials were sincere in their emphasis on preventive logic.

The 2003 Iraq War

A similar argument can be made about the processes leading to the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003. While analysts continue to debate the relative importance of various motivations leading to the U.S. decision for war, most agree that the presumed threat of an Iraqi nuclear weapons program was the primary means by which the George W. Bush Administration tried to mobilize public support for the war, and that it was the primary source of public support for the war. There is enough documentation for this in the literature (Isikoff and Corn 2006; Kaufman 2004; Rich 2006; Whitney 2005), and a few comments will be sufficient here. I leave aside the tactics through which the administration attempted to mobilize support for the war, and also the question of the extent to which members of the administration actually believed (and with what probability assessments) that Iraq had an active nuclear program.[43]

It is clear that contrary to the hypothesis that democratic publics will not tolerate preventively-motivated wars, in fact Americans believed that military intervention to destroy a developing nuclear weapons program, at least in Saddam's Iraq, was justified. In a September 2002 poll 82% of Americans believed that "strong evidence that Iraq is developing nuclear weapons or is about to the develop nuclear weapons" would justify American military intervention (NBC/*Wall Street Journal* Poll, September 3–5, 2002). In a January 2003 poll by the Pew Research Center, conducted while United Nations inspectors were in Iraq with UN authorization, 76% of respondents supported American military intervention if UN inspectors found evidence that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction, while 46% favored military action if they found that Iraq was hiding its ability to easily make WMD. Nearly 30% were willing to go to war if the inspectors found no weapons but either Iraq or UN inspectors could not assure that such weapons did not exist (Silverstone 2007, 188).

The public's willingness to support military action to destroy Iraq's WMD capabilities was not directly linked to fears of terrorism, as evidenced by support for such action prior to 11 September 2002. When Iraq blocked UN inspectors from unrestricted access to sensitive sites in early 1998, a February 1998 Gallup poll revealed that 60% of respondents believed that Iraqi defiance of the UN gave the United States the "moral justification" to use military force and that this was an important enough issue over which "to go to war." 60% supported the use of ground troops for that purpose, and 70% supported air strikes (Silverstone 2007, 185–186).

Contrary to the argument that institutional checks and balances in democratic states are a central means by which democratic leaders are constrained from undertaking preventive military strategies, the U.S. Congress failed to erect significant obstacles in the processes leading to the American war effort. Of the 77 Senators and 296 Representatives who voted in favor of the October 2002 Congressional resolution to authorize the president to use force against Iraq, many identified the nuclear threat as one of the primary reasons for their support (Kaufman 2004). Many subsequently stated that if they had known that Iraq did

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[43] This is a complex psychological question. American perceptions of the threat from Iraq were driven by unmotivated cognitive biases (Jervis 2006) and unconscious motivated biases as well as deliberate efforts to "fix intelligence and facts to fit a desired policy" (Danner 2006).

not have an active nuclear weapons program, they would not have voted for the war. Hillary Clinton later said that ''if we knew then what we know now, there wouldn't have been a vote ... and I certainly wouldn't have voted that way'' (NBC, ''Today'' show, 12/18/2006). The implication is that strong evidence that a hostile adversary is significantly increasing its military power, or at least developing a nuclear capability, is regarded as a legitimate justification for war.

The 1994 U.S. – North Korean Crisis[44]

In 1994, the Clinton Administration engaged in serious deliberations regarding a possible air strike against the North Korean nuclear complex at Yongbyon to prevent Kim Il Sung's regime from acquiring nuclear weapons. U.S. suspicions about a North Korean nuclear program go back to the early 1980s. In January 1992 the International Atomic Energy Administration (IAEA) initiated inspections at Yongbyon and demanded more intrusive inspections. The Kim Il Sung regime rejected these demands and in March 1993 withdrew from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. By fall 1993, the Clinton Administration believed that North Korea might already have enough plutonium to make two nuclear bombs, enough fuel rods to make five or six more, the capability of making ten or twelve nuclear bombs a year once its reactor moved into full-scale operation, and the ability to multiply that several times once its larger reactors were completed. North Korea's decision in spring 1994 to begin defueling its reactors triggered the crisis (Wit et al. 2004). The failure of diplomatic efforts led the Clinton administration to threaten the North Korean regime with economic sanctions if the North Korean regime did not terminate its nuclear program. Kim Il Sung responded by warning that sanctions would constitute an ''act of war'' and threatened ''to turn Seoul into a sea of flames'' (Carter and Perry 1999, 129).

The U.S. developed plans both for an air strike against the Yongbyon complex and for the defense against a North Korean invasion of the South that might follow. Secretary of Defense Perry later described these two options as ''unpalatable'' and ''disastrous.'' A nuclear North Korea involved ''intolerable'' risks, but a military strike was ''very likely to incite'' North Korea to attack the South. Moreover, an attempt to deter or defend against a North Korean invasion by building up American military forces risked a preemptive attack by the North (Carter and Perry 1999, 126–131; Oberdorfer 1997, 323).

Domestically, Republicans in Congress and conservative commentators were demanding a hard line against North Korea, and opinion polls showed substantial support for military action to keep North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons, even at the risk of a broader war. In a June 1994 poll, 48% of respondents said it was worth risking war to keep North Korea from making nuclear weapons (Sigal 1997, 302–303).

As Trachtenberg (2007, 17) notes, ''the smell of war was in the air.'' Robert Gallucci, who led the U.S. negotiating team, feared that the 1994 crisis resembled the July 1914 crisis, and ''had an escalatory quality that could deteriorate not only into a war but into a big war'' (Oberdorfer 1997, 306). Oberdorfer (1997, 306) notes that the top U.S. Air Force general in Korea said that ''although neither he nor other commanders said so out loud, not even in private conversations with one another, 'inside we all thought we were going to war.''' Perry believed at the time that ''we were poised on the brink of a war that might involve weapons of mass destruction.''

The crisis was resolved peacefully, however, when the Clinton Administration settled for a compromise with North Korea. There were two primary factors

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[44] This section draws on Levy and Gochal (2004) and Levy (2007).

pushing away from a U.S. air strike. One was the expectation that the attack would probably lead to a major war that would be very costly. Perry, Head of JCS General John Shalikashvili, and General Luck told Clinton on May 19th that a war to repulse a North Korean attack before it reached Seoul, followed by a counterattack into North Korea, would result in 52,000 U.S. troops killed or wounded, 490,000 Republic of Korean military casualties, ''enormous'' numbers of North Korean and civilian deaths, and a $61 billion cost, mostly to be paid by the US. (Oberdorfer 1997, 315; Sigal 1997, 211–212).[45] In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee several months later, Perry explained the administration's decision in terms of the fear that an air strike would result in ''North Korea's 1.1 million member army…leveling Seoul'' (Carter and Perry 1999, 128–129; Silverstone 2007, 145).

Another critical factor was the mission of former President Jimmy Carter to North Korea in the middle of the crisis. Clinton was ''within minutes'' of adopting one of three options to increase U.S. troop deployments in South Korea, which he recognized would have increased the risk of a general war on the peninsula and possibly lead to a preemptive attack by North Korea, when word of a provisional agreement negotiated by Carter arrived. Clinton Administration officials were furious at Carter's independent negotiating role, one calling it ''near traitorous'' (Oberdorfer 1997, 331). At that point, however, they believed that it would be diplomatically costly to reject the Carter plan outright, and they proceeded to use it as the basis for the ''Agreed Framework'' that brought a peaceful end to the crisis (Creekmore 2006; Gilinsky 1997; Wit et al. 2004).[46]

There is no evidence that normative beliefs that a preventive strike was immoral or contrary to American democratic identity played any role in the Clinton administration's decision-making. Silverstone (2007, 141–145), who emphasizes the constraining role of the ''anti-preventive war norm'' in the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations and to a certain extent into the 1960s, finds ''no hint'' of that norm in the 1994 North Korean crisis. He argues that U.S. decision-makers ''toyed with the preventive war option in a political atmosphere completely devoid of normative concerns about the legitimacy of preventive war.'' He notes that even those columnists and others who opposed war did not invoke the anti-preventive war norm. The Clinton Administration's decision against war ''was embedded not in normative beliefs about preventive war, but in raw calculations of the enormous material costs.''

Those material costs included perhaps a million fatalities from an expected war, and in that sense moral considerations influenced decision-making. They also motivated Carter's personal intervention (Creekmore 2006). We must distinguish, however, between arguments for saving lives wherever possible and arguments that it is immoral to initiate or provoke war in the absence of a ''clear and present danger.'' There was no sense in 1994, as there was early in the Cold War period (Silverstone 2007), that a strategy of preventive war in itself was morally questionable and contrary to American democratic identity. It is also clear that concerns about the human and economic costs of war came not from the American public, but from political leaders. Domestic pressures pushed more toward war than away from war.

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[45] Estimates varied. Four weeks later Luck warned that a war could lead to 1,000,000 dead, eighty to one hundred thousand of which could be Americans, and a price tag of $100 million (Oberdorfer 1997, 324; Sigal 1997, 154–155).

[46] The absence of diplomatic support from China and Japan (Sigal 1997, 9, 118) was a minor factor. Gilinsky (1997) argues that Clinton sought a compromise that he could frame as a ''diplomatic victory'' before the November elections.

Conclusion

I have argued that ambiguity regarding the meaning of the concept of preventive war has impeded the development of explanatory theory about this important phenomenon. I treat the preventive motivation for war as a variable that intervenes between power shifts and war and that constitutes a causal mechanism through which the former can lead to the latter. Expectations of an adverse shift in relative power induce fears about the risk of war under deteriorating circumstances in the future and about the kinds of concessions one would have to make to avoid such a war. Such fears generate better-now-than-later logic and the temptation to resort to military force to degrade adversary capabilities while the opportunity is still available.

I then turned to theoretical arguments that democracies rarely if ever fight preventively motivated wars because of institutional constraints, the electoral accountability of leaders, and beliefs that such strategies are contrary to democratic political values and identities. I summarized evidence from a number of historical cases, casting doubt on both the descriptive proposition that democracies do not adopt preventive war strategies and causal propositions about the constraining effects of democratic institutions and political cultures. There is one clear case of a democratic state going to war to block an adverse shift in the balance of power (Israel in 1956) and another of a democratic state initiating a preventive strike to destroy an adversary's developing nuclear capability (Israel in 1981). In each the anticipated power shift and the preventive logic it induced were necessary conditions for war. Both actions generated substantial domestic support, and the Israeli government in 1981 in particular justified its action explicitly in terms of the logic of prevention.

In two other cases (the United States in the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War and in the 2003 Iraq War), I focused not on the role of the preventive motivation in the American decision for war but instead on the processes through which U.S. political leaders tried to mobilize public support for the war and on the public response. The evidence shows that in each case fears of an Iraqi nuclear capability and the need for preventive military action to block it were the primary means by which the administration attempted to sell the war to the American people, and the primary grounds on which the public supported the war. This runs contrary to the theoretical underpinnings of the democracies-do-not-fight-preventive-wars hypothesis regardless of whether political leaders were sincere in their emphasis on preventive logic.

In the fifth case, the Clinton Administration gave serious consideration to a preventive strike against the North Korean nuclear complex. Clinton officials were constrained not by the lack of public support, and not by any sense that a preventive military strike was morally unacceptable or contrary to American democratic identity, but instead by cost-benefit calculations of feasibility and cost. Even so, the administration was moments away from a decision (economic sanctions) that many assumed could easily lead to a major war, when that decision was ''preempted'' by the unexpected (and unwanted) intervention of former President Carter.[47]

These case studies, while brief, provide strong evidence contradicting the unconditional statement that democracies never fight ''preventive wars.'' They also call into question causal arguments about the magnitude of domestic and normative constraints on democratic political leaders' adoption of preventive war

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[47] Material cost-benefit calculations, not domestic politics or a sense that a strategy of preventive war was contrary to democratic values, explain India's decision to refrain from a preventive strike against Pakistan's nuclear facilities in 1982 (Ganguly and Hagerty 2005, 55–57; Perkovich 1999). Strategic calculations also explain the decisions by France and Britain not to go to war against Hitler at the time of the Munich crisis (Ripsman and Levy 2007).

strategies. Much more work needs to be done on these questions, however, both in these and other cases involving democratic states facing a negative shift in military power. A more explicit comparison between democratic and nondemocratic states would also be useful.

This study suggests a number of other questions that need further exploration. One is alternative strategies for responding to rising adversaries. Nothing in this essay is meant to imply that prevention is the only strategy or the best strategy. Presumably it is a last resort, after the state attempts to enhance its own economic power and military potential or perhaps secure allies. At what point do states adopt a strategy of preventive war?

Another set of questions relates to bargaining. How much bargaining, and of what kinds, actually takes place between declining and rising states? Relatedly, to what extent do rising powers fear the possibility of a preventive strike, and what strategies do they adopt in response? Do they consider preempting the preventer? Does the possibility of prevention deter weaker states from building up their arms or does it provoke them into accelerating their buildup, perhaps with greater secrecy?

A somewhat related set of questions concerns the consequences of preventive strategies, both limited strikes and full-blown wars. Are preventive strategies successful in removing the threat? How quickly do defeated adversaries bounce back, and with what degree of added hostility? Do preventive strategies help undermine the international normative order that generally benefits the strong more than the weak? Do prospective preventers consider these future consequences in their calculations? These questions raise some difficult methodological issues. One is selection effects. An examination of preventively motivated strikes and wars that actually occur would bias the analysis toward cases where political leaders expected success, and result in a more favorable assessment of the likely success of preventive strategies than is warranted. Moreover, what is the standard against which success is evaluated? It presumably cannot be the status quo, since it was the expected deterioration of the status quo that motivated military action in the first place. The proper comparison is the likely outcome if the state had not acted, but this raises difficult counterfactual questions (Levy 2008).

Equally basic are questions regarding the conditions under which states are likely to adopt preventive war strategies in response to rising adversaries. We have plenty of hypotheses (Copeland 2000; Levy 1987; Ripsman and Levy 2007; Van Evera 1999), but little systematic empirical research. One question deserving particular attention is the impact of individual political leaders. Although we often think of preventive war strategies as structurally induced responses to relative decline, in fact states exhibit enormous variations in responses to rising states. Renshon (2006) argues, based on evidence from several cases, that much of this variation can be traced to individual political leaders and their belief systems. In terms of the cases surveyed here, it appears that individuals had a significant causal impact on decision-making in Israel in 1981 (Begin) and in the U.S. in 2003 (George W. Bush), a modest impact in Israel in 1956 (Ben-Gurion) and in the U.S. in 1994 (the role of Carter), and considerably less impact in the U.S. in 1991 (George H. W. Bush), but more work needs to be done on these and other cases.

Two key variables shaping leaders' threat perceptions and decisions are their time horizons and propensities toward risk-taking, though each is difficult to study empirically outside of a controlled laboratory setting. The strategy of preventive war involves accepting some costs now to avoid larger costs later, so how much individuals discount the future will have an important impact on their willingness to bear current costs. This raises the additional questions of whether democratic leaders have shorter time horizons because of their electoral

accountability, and whether some political cultures encourage longer time horizons than others.

Leaders' propensities for taking risks are also critical.[48] Decisions on whether or not to resort to a preventive war strategy in response to a rising adversary involve enormous uncertainties as to the consequences of both action and inaction (or an alternative strategy). There is both a fog of war and a fog of peace, and each involves short-term risks and long-term risks, and domestic political risks as well as military and diplomatic risks. Political leaders must somehow balance these risks in making a decision. The question is whether there are systematic patterns in leaders' responses to these multiple risks, perhaps influenced by loss aversion, as prospect theory suggests, or whether the response to risk is highly idiosyncratic, influenced by leaders' operational code belief systems or personalities.

Bismarck recognized both sides of the dilemma confronting policy makers. He stated that ''No government, if it regards war as inevitable even if it does not want it, would be so foolish as to leave to the enemy the choice of time and occasion and to wait for the moment which most convenient for the enemy.'' Over time, however, Bismarck grew increasingly cautious. He said that ''preventive war is like suicide for fear of death,'' and that ''We have to wait, rifle at rest, and see what smoke clouds and eruptions that volcano of Europe will bring forth.'' Referring to Frederick's attack against Austria in 1756, he suggested that a policy of preemption or prevention would ''break eggs out of which very dangerous chickens might arise'' (Fischer 1975, 377, 461; Vagts 1956, 290–291). This is both a useful warning to policy makers and a reminder to scholars of the central role of risk propensities in decisions for or against preventive war.

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[48] Technically, most of these decisions take place not under conditions of risk (where probabilities of outcomes are known) but rather under conditions of uncertainty (where probabilities are not known), which are more difficult to analyze.

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