Pre-Empting Pre-Emption

The media and the Left are currently gripped by an extraordinary obsession with the non-story of "Bush's Lie" – his **allegation** prior to the liberation of Iraq that Saddam had tried to obtain uranium from Africa.

Joel Mowbray's concise **analysis** (via **LGF**) hits the nail on the head. Aside from journalists and others who are merely interested in sensationalising stories, there's a more important group in the Bush-lied brigade:

> Somewhat less self-interested – though no less pernicious – are the folks who are perpetuating the myth because they want to torpedo any future pre-emptive attacks. On CNN last week (debating this columnist), Nation editor Katrina vanden Heuvel was clear about her motives for assailing Bush: "The preemptive doctrine… has now turned out to be an abysmal failure based on the fact that it is predicated on having 100 percent reliable intelligence – and we've seen an administration which clearly manipulated intelligence to take us into war."
>
> If vanden Heuvel and her cohorts can convince enough voters that the war was based on a lie, a President's ability to defend America with pre-emptive strikes will be seriously diminished. And that's exactly what the left wants.

In other words, this is all about pre-empting pre-emption: making it prohibitively expensive politically for any US President to use military action in future to prevent mass murders.

Since, as Joel Mowbray also remarks, "not a day goes by when terrorists and other thugs aren't plotting to murder Americans and our way of life", and since no purely defensive measures against terrorist mass murder can be effective indefinitely, the only possible alternatives to taking military action in advance of a preventable attack are taking it after the attack or not taking it at all. Either way, the attack itself is then guaranteed: successfully pre-empting pre-emption *means* successfully guaranteeing a mass murder that could have been prevented.

You will recall that we define **idiotarians** (**villepinists**?) as those

who systematically side with evil without themselves adopting the evildoers' objectives. The campaign against pre-emption is a textbook example of that, is it not?

Fri, 07/18/2003 - 12:07 | **permalink**

the only pre-emption ...

that I am in priciple opposed to is the Bush admin's pre-emption of our democratic process. If he did indeed knowingly mislead the American public and Congress in order to garner Congressional authorization for a war, then that is a grave offense indeed.

For more see: http://radio.weblogs.com/0126471/2003/07/17.html

by a reader on Fri, 07/18/2003 - 13:51 | **reply**

Pre-Emptive Strikes Have Costs, Too

While I agree with **The World** that pre-emptive strikes are sometimes justified and proper, I disagree with the implication that any attempts to ensure that the standards of evidence used in such a decision be quite high are "idiotarian" or "villepinist".

Yes, pre-emptive strikes can prevent tragedies, but mistaken pre-emptive strikes can cause them. There *should* be a high standard before taking such actions.

When you discuss pre-emption and its potential benefits, it's misleading if you don't also consider its potential costs.

If every policy that makes crime prevention more difficult than a tyrant can imagine is "idiotarian" (because it sides with hypothetical criminals),
then every decent person in the world is idiotarian. In order to be a bad thing, this "siding with evil" must be unreasonable after considering all of the relevant factors, not just because it fits a simplistic pattern of making some evil easier.

It could very well be that these people are on the wrong side of the idiotarian line, but it's important to remember that some people who want to make pre-emption difficult are on the good side of it.

by **Gil** on Fri, 07/18/2003 - 19:20 | **reply**

Re: Pre-Emptive Strikes Have Costs, Too

Gil wrote:

> When you discuss pre-emption and its potential benefits, it's misleading if you don't also consider its potential costs.

Very good point. I guess it definitely becomes idiotarian/villepinist when it, in effect, amounts to trying to prevent pre-emptive military

action altogether.

by **David Deutsch** on Fri, 07/18/2003 - 20:06 | **reply**

Re: Pre-Emptive Strikes Have Costs, Too

we *have* very high standards. people arguing for high standards are almost always looking for *higher* standards, especially ones that are infeasible to meet, because they are in fact idiotarians.

There is no credible threat for the standards to be lowered much (from people who like bloodbaths, I guess),
btw, so they don't have that excuse.

-- Elliot Temple
http://curi.blogspot.com/

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 07/19/2003 - 02:52 | **reply**

Are these standards falsifiable?

Is there any evidence that would convince you that taking the pre-emptive action was a mistake ? (such as failing to find WMD)

by a reader on Sat, 07/19/2003 - 20:03 | **reply**

Of course these standards are falsifiable

> Is there any evidence that would convince you that taking the pre-emptive action was a mistake ? (such as failing to find WMD)

Of course there is. If it turns out that Saddam was not in fact an evil tyrant, and that Bush and Blair knew this but faked all those threats that were coming from him, and that they faked the evidence of all those people he murdered and tortured and oppressed, and that it was really US forces all along who attacked Iran, Kuwait and Israel, then I for one will seriously consider not voting Bush in for a second term.

Also, if it turns out that World War 2 actually preceded World War 1, and that Napoleon was really a garden gnome, I will have to make other, albeit smaller, revisions in my conception of world history.

by a reader on Sat, 07/19/2003 - 22:23 | **reply**

Re: Of course these standards are falsifiable

So the standard is not: This government poses an immediate threat to your life and liberty. The standard is: This government murdered, tortured and oppressed it's citizens.

Isn't this true of most of the governments of South America, Africa and Asia? So these regimes must be overthrown as well.

by a reader on Sun, 07/20/2003 - 01:48 | **reply**

no no no

stop trying to put words in our mouths. it's not a mechanical criterion thing. rather we must use argument on a case by case basis.

-- Elliot Temple
http://curi.blogspot.com/

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 07/20/2003 - 16:27 | **reply**

Re: Gil

Gil writes:

When you discuss pre-emption and its potential benefits, it's misleading if you don't also consider its potential costs.

Yes, it is misleading if one doesn't consider the potential costs of pre-emption. That's why I'm so glad that those costs were indeed considered and taken into account.

Remember: the statement "but you should take X into account", true or not, does not constitute an argument that we *didn't* take X into account - even if you think we didn't. Say I wanna drive to the mall. You: "but remember you should take the cost of gas into account." But maybe I did. Even if I still end up driving to the mall. In any event the fact that I choose to drive to the mall doesn't mean I *didn't* take the price of gas into account.

Many if not most of the people who use the "but you should take into account" line seem strangely incapable of comprehending that I can take their concern X into account and *still* decide that doing the opposite of what they want is the best course of action overall. To such people, if I disagree with them, I must not have thought about the issue enough, not as deeply as them! I hope you're not one of these arrogant people.

by a reader on Mon, 07/21/2003 - 21:54 | **reply**

further discussion on pre-emptive strikes

> Is there any evidence that would convince you that taking the
> pre-emptive action was a mistake ? (such as failing to find WMD)

You say "the pre-emptive action", so I presume the question relates to the pre-emptive American attack on Iraq (and not the pre-emptive attack on Afghanistan, or proposed pre-emptive strikes in the future)...

The reader who wrote "of course these standards are falsifiable" was, to my way of thinking, being a bit too flip on a serious subject. A strong and valid point was made, however -- pre-emptive action in Iraq was justified on several counts. Most of them have not

changed a bit; some of them, by their very nature, CANNOT

change.

For example, UNSC Resolution 1441 required Saddam to comply completely, unreservedly, and immediately to a list of inspection-related activites. He did not. His actions made it quite clear that he was jerking the world around, and that, whatever his WMD activities might have been, he had no slightest intention of being forthcoming about them. It was known that he HAD had WMD, and that no credible evidence had been presented for him having destroyed all of them; the obvious conclusion was that he still had some of them. It was known that he had no compunctions against USING his WMD, for he had done so before. It was known that he provided financial and material aid to terrorists, including terrorists hostile to the United States. It was known that he himself was hostile to the United States.

The inescapable conclusion from these facts, in early 2003, was that Saddam's regime posed a significant threat to the United States. He had an interest in helping terror attacks against the United States, and it could not be proven that he did NOT have WMD; what we DID know was that, if he had them, and saw an opportunity to use them (or to encourage others to use them) against the United States, he would do so.

No new revelations can possibly change what we knew in early 2003, which were more than sufficient to justify an American pre-emptive strike against Iraq.

Let's try a personal example. If you threaten me every day or so; if sometimes your insults include vague death threats; if one day those threats expand to include my family; and if, one dusky evening, I spot you lurking on my property, carrying something that looks very much like a weapon, what do I do? If I'm smart, I act on the information I have, and I call the police immediately. Perhaps I take action myself to stop you.

Now, suppose that, after I tackle you to the ground and hold you until the police arrive, it turns out that you're unarmed. You were carrying a water pistol, because you enjoy carrying them; it was unloaded. You were on my property looking for a shortcut to the local YMCA. You were wearing dark clothing because you've run out of clean laundry. Would that make my "pre-emptive attack" on you unjustified?

I would argue that, no, my attack would be emminently justifiable, IN TERMS OF WHAT I KNEW AT THE TIME. It was not my choice, in this hypothetical scenario, to be threatened; it was not my choice to be trespassed upon. But the prospect of tackling someone unnecessarily, from my point of view, is infinitely preferable to the other alternative -- doing nothing, and watching helplessly as you visit mayhem on me and my family, precisely as you threatened to do. (Yes, in this scenario, you are unarmed. But I don't know that yet, so these two alternatives will seem equally probable to me.)

(I'll ignore the legal issues -- what if I break your arm in the process of tackling you? Can you, and should you, sue me? -- because they're not relevant, and because I don't live in Britain...)

In short, I believe the pre-emptive strike against Iraq was the correct thing to do, BASED ON WHAT WAS KNOWN AT THE TIME. Yes, it was also an extremely humanitarian thing to do; there have been other benefits after the fact. But the primary reason for attacking Iraq, in my opinion, was that there was plenty of cause to see him as a threat -- a view Saddam himself seemed to enjoy encouraging.

In re pre-emptive strikes as a general tactic -- yes, of course, the standards for going ahead with one must be quite high. David Deutsch and Elliot Temple have the right idea, in my opinion; set the standards high, and, when those standards are met, DON'T HESITATE.

sincerely,
Daniel in Medford

by a reader on Mon, 07/21/2003 - 22:02 | **reply**

to expand

a choice is right or it is not right. period. what happens has no effect on this. a simple way to see that what happens can have no bearing: physics is **deterministic** so the outcome was predetermined when the choice was made anyway.

another point is: we cannot choose based on information we do not have; we are not wrong to make choices without being omniscient. so if you oppose some choice you have 2 lines of attack: 1) the choice was best possible under circumstances, BUT the person was wrongly negligent in allowing himself to be ignorant and make such bad choices 2) the person chose wrong given what he knew

"it turned out badly" cannot cut it as a direct argument.

-- Elliot Temple
http://curi.blogspot.com/

by **Elliot Temple** on Mon, 07/21/2003 - 22:31 | **reply**

Re: Gil

A reader wrote:

> Many if not most of the people who use the "but you should take into account" line seem strangely incapable of comprehending that I can take their concern X into account and *still* decide that doing the opposite of what they want is the best course of action overall. To such people, if I disagree with them, I must not have thought about the issue enough, not as deeply as them! I hope you're not one of these arrogant people.

No, I'm not one of *those* arrogant people.

I was not criticizing the campaign in Iraq (of which I approve). I'm

satisfied that the costs and benefits were weighed, and that the actions taken were reasonable and justified.

I was just pointing out that the argument in the original post could be interpreted as implying that any argument that seeks to have high standards of evidence before engaging in pre-emptive strikes necessarily makes things easier on the bad guys and is thus idiotarian. It seemed to only examine one side of the ledger.

I wanted to point out that it isn't enough to only examine whether bad people might be helped, but whether the proposal makes it more likely that the right thing will happen, considering both the benefits *and* the costs.

by **Gil** on Tue, 07/22/2003 - 17:28 | **reply**

More about why the lie matters ...

http://radio.weblogs.com/0126471/2003/07/22.html#a86

by a reader on Tue, 07/22/2003 - 23:46 | **reply**

yes but

Gil,

good points, except you've forgotten the point (or assertion, let's say) made in the original post: that the critics are trying to "pre-empt pre-emption" itself. That is, take pre-emption off the table completely as an option (because it's predicated on 100 percent knowledge and you can never have that, or similar arguments). You can disagree with that assertion and say "no they're not, they're just demanding high/higher standards", and indeed that is probably true of some people. But apparently not Katrina Vandenheuvel if the excerpt quoted from her is any indication: "the preemptive doctrine" is a "failure", in her view. In other words, no pre-emption. Sure sounds like a villipenism to me. But you're right, this statement being a villipenism doesn't mean that all requests for high/higher standards of evidence on these matters are. On the other hand, I don't think anyone said otherwise in the first place.
best,

by a reader on Wed, 07/23/2003 - 00:37 | **reply**

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