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The Doctrine of Preemption

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on May 23, 2005, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Dallas, Texas.

What I will say tonight about the war on terror draws heavily on my earlier life as a professor and student of political philosophy. A long life in journalism and around Washington, D.C., has taught me not just that ideas have consequences, but that *only* ideas have large and lasting consequences. We are in a war of terror being waged by people who take ideas with lethal seriousness, and we had better take our own ideas seriously as well.

I think the beginning of understanding the war is to understand what happened on 9/11. What happened was that we as a people were summoned back from a holiday from history that we had understandably taken at the end of the Cold War. History is served up to the American people with uncanny arithmetic precision. Almost exactly sixty years passed from the October 1929 collapse of the stock market to the November 1989 crumbling of the Berlin Wall—sixty years of depression, hot war, and cold war, at the end of which the American people said: “Enough, we are not interested in war anymore.” The trouble is, as Trotsky once said, “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.” And this was a war with a new kind of enemy—suicidal, and hence impossible to deter, melding modern science with a kind of religious primitivism. Furthermore, our enemy today has no return address in the way that previous adversaries, be it Nazi Germany or Stalin’s Russia, had return addresses. When attacks emanated from Germany or Russia, we could respond militarily or we could put in place a structure of deterrence and containment. Not true with this new lot.

Our enemy today refutes an axiom that has governed international relations for nearly 400 years, since the Peace of Westphalia, when the nation-state system began to emerge in



Europe. The axiom was that a nation could only be mortally threatened or seriously wounded by another nation—by massed armies and fleets on the seas, and an economic infrastructure to support both. This is no longer true. It is perfectly clear now that one maniac with a small vial of smallpox spores can kill millions of Americans. That is a guess, but an educated guess based on a U.S. government simulated disaster that started in an Oklahoma shopping center. Smallpox is a strange disease; it has a ten-day incubation period when no one knows they have it. We are mobile people, we fly around, we breathe each other's airplane air. The U.S. government, taking this mobility into account, estimated that in just three weeks, one million Americans in 25 states would die from one outbreak like that.

On the other hand, the enemies who attacked us on 9/11 failed to ask themselves the question, "But then what?" That is the question Admiral Yamamoto asked when the Japanese government summoned him in 1940 and asked him to take a fleet stealthily across the North Pacific and deliver a devastating blow against the American navy at Pearl Harbor. Yamamoto said he could do that if his government would design some shallow running torpedoes and a few other things. He said he could run wild in the Pacific for six months, or maybe a year. But he asked his government, "Then what?" Yamamoto knew America, and he loved America. He studied at Harvard and had been back to the U.S. as a diplomat in Washington. He knew that after Pearl Harbor, Japan would have an enraged, united, incandescent, continental superpower on its hands, and that Japan's ultimate defeat would be implicit in its initial victory. Our current enemies will learn the same thing.

Preemption: Necessary but Problematic

Meanwhile we have worries—and these are not new worries. In 1946, Congress held what are today remembered, by the few who remember such things, as the "Screwdriver Hearings." They summoned J. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Manhattan Project, and asked him if it would be possible to smuggle an atomic device into New York City and detonate it. Oppenheimer replied that of course it would be possible.

Congress then asked how it would be possible to detect such a device. Oppenheimer answered: "With a screwdriver." What he meant was that every container that came into the city of New York would have to be opened and inspected.

This year, seven million seaborne shipping containers will pass through our ports. About five percent will be given cursory examination. About 30,000 trucks crossed our international borders today. If this was a normal day, about 21,000 pounds of cocaine, marijuana, and heroin were smuggled into our country. How hard would it be, then, to smuggle in a football-sized lump of highly enriched uranium sufficient to make a ten-kiloton nuclear weapon to make Manhattan uninhabitable for a hundred years?

To enrich uranium is an enormous, complex process that requires scientists and vast physical plants. But once you have it, making a nuclear weapon requires only two or three good physics graduate students. And there is an enormous amount of fissile material floating around the world. In 1993, some officials from the U.S. Energy Department, along with some Russian colleagues, went to a Soviet-era scientific facility outside Moscow and used bolt cutters to snip off the padlock—the sum of all the security at this place. Inside, they found enough highly enriched uranium for 20 nuclear weapons. In 2002, enough fissile material for three weapons was recovered in a laboratory in a Belgrade suburb. And so it goes. The Soviet Union, in its short and deplorable life, deployed about 22,000 nuclear weapons. Who believes they have all been accounted for? The moral of this story is: you cannot fight terrorism at the ports of Long Beach or Newark. You have to go get it. You have to disrupt terrorism at its sources. This is a gray area. It's a shadow war. But it is not a war that we have any choice but to fight.

This leads us directly to the doctrine of preemption, with which there are several problems. First, we do not yet have—as it has been made painfully clear—the intelligence capacity that a doctrine of preemption really requires. The second problem with preemption is encapsulated in Colin Powell's famous "Pottery Barn principle," which Mr. Powell explained to the President before the second war with Iraq began: If you break it, you own it. Iraq is broken; we own it for the moment. And we are therefore engaged in nation building.

This is particularly a problem for conservatives, who understand that societies and nations are complex, organic things—not put together and taken apart like Tinker Toys. The phrase

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“nation building” sounds to many conservatives much the way the phrase “orchid building” would sound. An orchid is a complex, wonderful, beautiful, natural thing, but it is not something that can be built. Conservatives know it took thirty years in this country to rebuild the south Bronx. And now we have taken on a nation to build.

There are those who say that neoconservatives—and most of my friends are neoconservatives, although I am not quite—have exported the impulse for social engineering that conservatives have so rightly criticized over the years at home. There is, of course, an element in this critique of President Bush’s policies that echoes in part the contemporary liberal version of isolationism. The old isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s was a conservative isolationism, and it held that America should not go abroad into the world because America is too good for the world. The contemporary liberal brand of isolationism—the Michael Moore view of the world—is that America should not be deeply involved in the world because the world is too good for America. This is not a serious argument, even though seriously held.

The serious argument over nation building is an argument conducted between conservatives of good will with one another. On the one

hand, we have a school broadly called the realist school, and on the other hand, there is a school associated with Woodrow Wilson and his crusading zeal for the export of democracy. President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, two intelligent and very good men, have in them a large share of Wilson’s crusading messianic spirit, a spirit that is quite natural to America. Once you enunciate a country founded on principles that have universality written in them, as our Declaration of Independence does—i.e., “all men are created equal . . . endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights”—a kind of universal eligibility for these rights is postulated. What the realists remind us is that over time, it is the details that matter.

President Bush has said, in a phrase he got from Ronald Reagan, that it is cultural condescension to say that some people are not ready for democracy. Tony Blair, in July 2003, after the fall of Baghdad, came before a joint session of Congress and gave a wonderful, generous, good ally speech, in which he said that it is a “myth” that our values are simply “Western values,” or simply a product of our culture. Our principles, he said, are “universal,” embraced by all “ordinary people.” The problem is that this belief—that



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every person is at heart a Jeffersonian Democrat, that all the masses of the world are ready for democracy—might lead you not to plan very carefully for post-war nation building. If this is true, then nation building should be a snap, because everyone is ready for democracy.

Realists know better. They know there was a long, 572-year uphill march from Runnymede to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787. Even more sobering, our Constitutional Convention was followed in less than 75 years by the bloodiest Civil War the world had ever seen, to settle some leftover constitutional questions. We know from our history how difficult regime change is. When the president speaks of regime change, he is using a term from Aristotle. For Aristotle, changing a regime did not mean substituting a few public officials for other public officials. For Aristotle, a regime meant the habits, mores, customs, dispositions, public philosophy, and culture of politics that sustain public institutions. Therefore, regime change is statecraft and soulcraft; it is changing the temperament of a people. It is very complicated.

Major League Baseball managers often say in spring training that they are just two players away from a World Series. Unfortunately, the two play-

ers are Ruth and Gehrig. Likewise, Iraq is just four statesmen away from sturdy constitutionalism. All they need is a George Washington, a charismatic figure to unify the nation; a James Madison, a genius of constitutional architecture; an Alexander Hamilton, who can create from whole cloth a functioning economy; and a John Marshall, a jurist who knows how to change a constitution from words on parchment into a breathing, functioning document. Most of all, of course, they need the astonishingly rich social soil of America in the second half of the 18th century from which Washington, Madison, Hamilton and Marshall sprang. All of which is to say that Iraq may not be close to constitutional democracy just yet.

The Miracle of America

I say this not to disparage the Iraqi people but to increase our appreciation of what a miracle the United States is. John Adams said that the American Revolution was accomplished before the Battles of Lexington and Concord. Everyone used to learn—we do not learn these things anymore—Emerson’s great poem about

the battle of Concord's bridge: "by the rude bridge that arched the flood/their flag to April's breeze unfurled/here once the embattled farmers stood/and fired the shot heard round the world." But before that shot was fired, according to John Adams, independence had already been accomplished, because the spirit of independence was in the hearts and minds of the American people, a people prepared to shed blood in defense of their God-given natural rights.

One of the mistakes our enemies have made—and one of the reasons I wish our enemies would study American history to disabuse themselves of some of their grotesque errors—is their belief that we are squeamish about defending freedom and about the violence of war. They persist in the assumption that we are casualty averse. Osama Bin Laden said as much after the Somalia debacle when President Clinton, after suffering some casualties, immediately withdrew American forces. Whether or not we should have been in Somalia is another matter, but the means by which we left Somalia clearly convinced our enemies that we were paper tigers. People have been making that mistake since General Howe made it in the Battle of Brooklyn Heights in the Revolutionary War. He chased us across the East River and figured that was that. It was said again after the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862—up to that day the bloodiest day in American history. Many observers thought the North would sue for accommodation and, in the words of Horace Greeley, let our erring sisters go in peace. It did not turn out that way.

A few months after Shiloh, some men were seen on the still corpse-strewn fields of northern Maryland, men carrying strange devices. They were from Mathew Brady's photography studio in New York, and they took pictures. Three months later, these photos became an exhibit of devastating impact in Manhattan called "The Dead of Antietam." It was the first time graphic journalism had brought the real face of war to a democratic public. And it raised the question that to this day affects us and troubles political leaders: Does graphic journalism—first photography and then, of course, television—that brings war into our living rooms, in real time, cause nations to crack when they see the real face of battle?

The First World War produced the worst carnage the world had ever seen, but not once during the war did a picture of a dead Brit or dead Frenchman or dead German or dead American soldier appear in a newspaper of any of those countries. In the Second World War,

the first picture of an American soldier dead in the surf in the Pacific did not appear in *Life* magazine until it had been held up in the War Department (as the Pentagon was then known) for nine months. The war in Vietnam produced more anxiety about graphic journalism, where it was suggested that in fact it was television that caused the American will to break. In fact, the American will never broke—but that is another matter. This has been a constant recurring anxiety in America, as Winston Churchill could have told us—and in fact did tell us when he came to North America immediately after Pearl Harbor. Churchill gave a speech in which he said, "We have not journeyed all this way across the centuries, across the oceans, across the mountains, across the prairies, because we are made of sugar candy." No, we are not. We are much tougher than our enemies understand.

Character and the Power of Ideas

One hundred years ago, people believed not only that war was inevitable, but that war was good for us. Without it, they thought, we would have to look for strenuous domestic challenges that would be the moral equivalent of war—something elevating that would pull us out of ourselves and into great collective endeavors as war does. Tocqueville said, "war almost always enlarges the thought of a people and elevates its heart." Stravinsky, the great composer, said war is "necessary for human progress." All of these men echoed Immanuel Kant, who said "a prolonged peace favors the predominance of a mere commercial spirit, and with it a debasing self-interest, cowardice, and effeminacy and tends to degrade the character of the nation."

There is much to be said for the commercial spirit, because the commercial spirit is a civilizing spirit. It is a spirit conducive to cooperation among peoples and within a political community. We are today engaged in a great race to see if we can integrate China into the community of nations with less catastrophic violence than that which accompanied the attempt 100 years ago to integrate the newly muscular and buoyant and dynamic nation of Germany into the community of nations. In the 33 years since President Nixon went to China in 1972, Republicans and Democrats alike have followed the same national policy, which holds that if we can only suffuse China with the commercial spirit, it can be

tranquilized and made civilized. The reason for believing this is that commerce, entrepreneurship, and all the various elements of capitalism form an enveloping, civilizing culture.

Capitalism requires the diffusion of decision-making and the diffusion of information. Capitalism requires contracts—a culture of promise-keeping enforced by the judicial system. It requires banks to make self-interested, calculated, and rational allocations of wealth and opportunity. It sublimates the troublesome passions of mankind into improving the material well-being of people. It is for this reason that what we want to do with the fever swamps of the Middle East that produce our enemies is to try and drain those swamps and bring to them enterprise cultures. It is altogether right that Paul Wolfowitz, one of the architects of the war against Iraq, is now going to the World Bank where he can try and help the next stage of development, which is to spread the commercial spirit. In some ways, this is the American spirit.

On the other hand, as Tocqueville warned us, if a people is only concerned with material well-being, only concerned with commercialism, they lack something—they lack the heights of nobility and character and aspiration. But first things first: get people into this enveloping culture of capitalism. Nor is this to say that we Americans are a materialist people. The stupidest political slogan I have heard in three-and-a-half decades in Washington was the Clinton slogan in 1992, “It’s the economy, stupid.” The American people almost never vote their pocketbook as is commonly said, and almost never vote merely on economics. We are a much more morally serious and complicated people than that.

In the 1790s, our party system began to coalesce with, on the one hand, Jefferson advocating a sturdy yeoman republic, a static society of the kind he lived in, and, on the other hand, Hamilton urging a speculative, entrepreneurial society with a system of credit, a dynamic urban society. Hamilton’s “Report on Manufactures” was obviously couched in economic terms, but it was not about economics at all. It was about national character and what kind of people we would be. Later, Andrew Jackson defined modern democratic populist politics with his attack on the Bank of the United States. It was not about a bank; it was about morality. He argued that speculators earn their dishonest living through banks. Jackson did not understand much about the modern world or capitalism, but he held

that people who earn their living that way are bad people. He thought it was bad for the soul. And throughout our history it has not mattered whether we were arguing about abolitionism, immigration, prohibition or desegregation. All of the great arguments that have roiled American politics over the years have not been pocketbook issues. They have been about the soul of the country and what kind of people we would be.

Well, the kind of people we *are* is a people who rise to the challenge of the new kind of enemy we have today. Our enemy has ideas. They are vicious, bad, retrograde, medieval, intolerant, and suicidal ideas, but ideas nevertheless. And we oppose them with the great ideas of freedom and democracy, which America has defined better than anyone in the world. And we turn to these people with an energy they could not have counted on. Edward Grey once said, “The United States is like a gigantic boiler. Once the fire is lighted under it, there is no limit to the power it can generate.” And these enemies improvidently lit a fire under us.

We have done this before. In September 1942, General Les McGraw of the Army Corps of Engineers bought for the government about 90,000 acres of Tennessee wilderness. There was nothing there—no roads, no towns, nothing. It was along the Clinch River, in eastern Tennessee, not far from Knoxville. But very soon there were streets and shops and schools and homes and some of the finest physics labs the world had ever seen. And 35 months later, on a desert in New Mexico, there was a flash brighter than a thousand suns and the atomic age began. Thirty-five months from wilderness to Alamogordo. That is what America does when aroused, because, as I say, we are not made of sugar candy.

Today we are the legatees of all the giants on whose shoulders we stand. We live in circumstances our parents did not live in, or our grandparents. We live in a time in which there is no rival model to the American model for how to run a modern industrial commercial society. Socialism is gone. Fascism is gone. Al-Qaeda has no rival model about how to run a modern society. Al-Qaeda has a howl of rage against the idea of modernity. We began in 1945 an astonishingly clear social experiment: We divided the city of Berlin, the country of Germany, the continent of Europe, indeed the whole world, and we had a test. On one side was the socialist model that says that society is best run by edicts, issued from a coterie of experts from above. The American model, on the other hand, called for a maximum dispersal of decision-making and



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information markets allocating wealth and opportunity. The results are clear: We are here, they are not. The Soviet Union tried for 70 years to plant Marxism with bayonets in Eastern Europe. Today there are more Marxists on the Harvard faculty than there are in Eastern Europe.

We must struggle today with the fact that the doctrine of preemption is necessary, and with the serious problems it entails. But what we must have overall is the confidence that our ideas are right. I grew up in Lincoln country and I am reminded that in 1859, with war clouds lowering over the country, Abraham Lincoln gave a speech at the Wisconsin State Fair. In the course of this speech, Lincoln told the story of an Eastern despot who summoned his wise men and gave them an assignment. Go away and think, he said, and come back and give me

a proposition to be carved in stone to be forever in view and forever true. The wise men went away and came back some days later, and the proposition they gave to him was: "And this, too, shall pass away." Lincoln said: perhaps not. If we Americans cultivate our inner lives and our moral selves as industriously and productively as we cultivate the material world around us, he said, then perhaps we of all peoples can long endure. He was right. We have and we shall persevere, in no small measure because of the plucky brand of people, true to these ideas, such as those that have formed around the college we here celebrate tonight.



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