Back to index

Have the Preventative Warriors Made Us Safer?

Michael Burns, The University of Birmingham

Michael Burns is the director of the new documentary, Preventive Warriors, on the National Security Strategy of 2002. For more information see www.preventivewarriors.com

In September of 2002 the Bush Administration released its National Security Strategy. Unlike most government documents, the National Security Strategy was widely reported on in the US and abroad because of what it set out to do. The document's key thesis, forming the core of what's been labelled the Bush Doctrine, was that threats to the US and its allies are so great and so unique historically that the only way to defeat them and disrupt their efforts is to attack them and their state sponsors before they have attacked us. In essence, whether you agree with the Strategy or not, it sets aside international legal engagement standards and prescribes preventive warfare against rogue states in which potential threats are destroyed before they have fully formed.

In the wake of its release Georgetown Professor John Ikenberry wrote in the October issue of Foreign Affairs, "At the extreme, these notions form a neo-imperial vision in which the United States arrogates to itself the global role of setting standards, determining threats, using force, and meting out justice. It is a vision in which sovereignty becomes more absolute for America even as it becomes more conditional for countries that challenge Washington's standards of internal and external behaviour… In one sense, such conditional sovereignty is not new. What is new and provocative in this notion today, however, is the Bush administration's inclination to apply [its power] on a global basis, leaving to itself the authority to determine when sovereign rights have been forfeited, and doing so on an anticipatory basis."[1]

This fall will mark the second year anniversary of the National Security Strategy (barring an unlikely updating from the Bush Administration). Though much has been written and asked about the document, perhaps the most basic question it prompts deserves re-asking. Given that any national security strategy, including the NSS of 2002, is ostensibly designed to deal with threats and thereby increase security, the question is, has it in fact accomplished its most fundamental, stated goal? Has it made the United States, and by extension, the world, a safer place?

On May 27th in London, Amnesty International released its annual report on human rights around the world. They noted that in prosecuting its war against terrorism the US has proven "bankrupt of vision and bereft of principle" and that "sacrificing human rights in the name of security at home, turning a blind eye to abuse abroad, and using pre-emptive military force where and when it chooses have neither increased security nor ensured liberty."[2] AI concluded that the US has "lost its moral high ground and its ability to lead on peace and human rights" around the world given the fact that "not since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted [56 years ago] has there been such a sustained attack on its values and principles."[3]

If ones believe that peoples' attitudes toward the United States government have anything to do with their being more or less terrorism against the US or its allies, then the numbers on that front since the release of the NSS look equally as discouraging. According to the Pew Research Centre, international discontent with America and its policies has intensified around the world rather than diminished post 9/11. Taking just traditionally allied populations in Europe, over the last three years favourable ratings of the US have gone from 78% to 25 in Germany, 76 to 34 in Italy, 50 to 14 in Spain, 86 to 50 in Poland, and 52 to 12 in Turkey, one of the top recipients of US foreign aid.[4] And those are the allies. One can only imagine the digit results in populations hostile to the US.

Of course in asking whether the world is safer since the release of the National Security Strategy you'd have to discuss the war in Iraq: the first major test of the Bush Administration's preventive war policy. In mid-June a group of former US officials, twenty-six former diplomats and military officials, including both Republican and Democratic appointees of former presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior, issued an open statement criticizing Bush's war in Iraq and for attempting to undo fifty plus years of post-war diplomatic relationships. William Harrop, a former ambassador to Israel

under the previous Bush administration, said, "We just came to agreement that this administration was really endangering the United States."[5]

But there is more to write about Iraq than just this. The country has been turned into a terrorist centre, with dozens killed weekly, twenty-one followed by over one hundred in just two consecutive days the week of this writing. And that's a terrorist centre, horrendous atrocities of the dictator aside, which no one (including revisionist columnists) can try to pretend existed previously under Saddam Hussein. And when it comes to the spreading of dangerous weapons, as Chalmers Johnson articulates, the world is just recognizing that what was wrong with Saddam Hussein was not that he had weapons of mass destruction, but that he didn't have them. It's a frightening lesson for the world to learn, one that stimulates overt and covert proliferation of WMDs as countries race to immune themselves from US attack, and one that has the polar opposite effect of making the US or any country safer.

And lastly, CNN reported on June 11th that the April US State Department Report "Patterns of Global Terrorism" which declared a decline in terrorism in 2003 was wrong and based on faulty data. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that the people who tabulated the report apparently did not look at the entire year and did not include attacks that should have been defined as acts of terrorism. The corrected report, he added, will show a "sharp increase in acts of worldwide terrorism over the previous year."[6]

Despite the failure of the National Security Strategy to live up to its name and increase security around the world or even decrease the likelihood of terrorist attacks against the US and its allies, its proponents are not dissuaded. Although they ceaselessly conflate pre-emption, prevention, and unilateralism despite the important differences among the three, the president's backers argue that the Bush Doctrine is far from abandoned. As Project for the New American Century's Gary Schmitt wrote last month in the Los Angles Times, "That going to war in Iraq has proved more difficult than anticipated does not change the underlying realities that gave rise to the Bush Administration's decision to give pre-emption a more prominent status is US statecraft. Do we think the potential consequences of terrorists getting their hands on weapons of mass destruction are any less significant? Are we more confident that rouge states… would never conspire with terrorist to carry out an operation against our allies or us, the Great Satan, with such weapons? These questions are not going away, and thus pre-emption as an option will not go away either."[7]

Others see the situation differently. Council on Foreign Relations members wrote last month, "Not being a man given to analysing his missteps, Bush will not publicly bury the pre-emption doctrine he unveiled only two years ago. But all doctrines must eventually be measured against experience. And for that reason, Bush's doctrine of pre-emption is, for all intents and purposes, dead."[8]

Whether it is dead or not, or whether it is wise or not, given the overstretch of American troops around the world, the fact of the matter is that given America's hyper-power status in the world, the US can attack preventively and most likely will again. Right now, the political costs of doing so seem too high given that the war in Iraq was based on lies as well as the fact that President Bush's poll numbers are not promising. But the next preventive war may not be carried within the same phantom menace context as the last one. It might come in the wake of a very real threat, perhaps even a major 9/11 calibre terrorist attack which the Administration could try to link to a country they've targeted. Under these very possible circumstances, the preventive war doctrine might not be as dead as it seems. Moreover, as a new style of US foreign policy may be ushered in come November, the substance of US willingness to use unilateral force remains, as John Kerry's advisors, including Samuel Berger in this month's leading establishment journal, never fail to make clear.[9]

Indeed, this year's choices go beyond the two candidates poised to dominate the political landscape this fall. The choices and challenges ahead are significant. Americans will have to decide whether or not they want to live in a country that considers itself one nation among many that should be subjected to the same rules that it applies to others. They will also have to decide whether they will condone a national security policy roundly condemned by public and professional groups around the world for failing to even accomplish its most basic goal. Those outside of America will have to decide how to continue to discover modes of internal and external pressure on (and alternative power centres vis-à-vis) an America once again approaching them for support in the midst of the chaos of the Iraqi experiment.

Another way of framing the choices ahead, whether one is an American or not, is this, in the words of Noam Chomsky:

"For the second anniversary [of the release of the National Security Strategy] and beyond, we basically have two choices. We can march forward with confidence that the global enforcer will drive evil from the world, much as the president's speechwriters declare, plagiarizing ancient epics and children's tales. Or we can subject the doctrines of the proclaimed grand new era to scrutiny, drawing rational conclusions, perhaps gaining some sense of the emerging reality," and in the process explore alternative models for how to survive as a species, let alone exist peacefully, in today's dangerous world. [10]

---

[1] John Ikenberry, "America's Imperial Ambition", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2002.

[2] "Amnesty International blasts US 'war on terror'", *The Daily Star*, 27 May 2004, available at: <www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=4513>.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] "America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties: But Post-War Iraq Will Be Better Off, Most Say", *The Pew Research Center*, 18 March 2003,available at: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=175>.

[5] "Former officials to criticize Bush foreign policy", *Reuters*, 14 June 2004, available at: <http://in.news.yahoo.com/040613/137/2dm5r.html>.

[6] "State Department retracts terrorism assertion", *CNN.com*, 10 June 2004, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/US/06/10/powell.terror.report/>.

[7] Gary Schmitt, "Shooting First", *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 2004, available at: www.newamericancentury.org/defense-20040601.htm>.

[8] James M. Lindsay and Ivo H. Daalder, "Shooting First: The preemptive-war doctrine has met an early death in Iraq", *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 2004, available at: < http://www.cfr.org/pub7066/james_m_lindsay_ivo_h_daalder/shooting_first_the_preemptivewar_doctrine_has_met_an_early_death_in_iraq.php>.

[9] See Samuel Berger, "A Democratic Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2004.

[10] Noam Chomsky, "Reason to fear US", *Toronto Star*, 7 September 2003, available at: <www.chomsky.info/articles/20030907.htm>.