To preempt or not to preempt  
Resolutional Overview by Mark Csoros



7:45 am, June 5th, 1967. Operation Focus. The Israeli military launches its first strike against an Egyptian airbase. As the day progresses, swift Israeli raids decimate the air capabilities of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. By nightfall, Israel has unchallenged dominion over the airspace from Cairo, Egypt, to Damascus, Syria.[[1]](#footnote-1) By the 11th of June, when a ceasefire is brokered by the U.N., Israel has taken control of the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip from the Palestinians, and the Golan Heights region from Syria.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The 6 Days War of 1967 is one of the best examples of preemptive warfare. Israel struck hard, struck fast, and dominated a set of underprepared and overconfident adversaries. It’s going to be one of the primary examples for this year of Stoa LD debate, because the resolution is that Preemptive warfare is morally justified. **The purpose of this article is to provide you with a broad overview of the topic, and to prepare you to delve deeper into this resolution.**

# Definitions

Let’s start with definitions, because those are pretty foundational. Since the concept of moral justification is captured primarily by standards, not by definitions, we’ll start with “preemptive warfare.” Cambridge Dictionary defines preemptive:

If something is preemptive, it is done before other people can act, especially to prevent them from doing something else.*[[3]](#footnote-3)*

In other words, “preemptive” means “ahead of the curve.” The word itself can carry negative or positive connotations, depending on context. Preempting a gunshot by wearing a bulletproof vest is wise, while preemptively starting a race is considered cheating. So, what is warfare? Merriam Webster describes it as:

*-military operations between enemies:* [*hostilities*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hostilities)*,* [*war*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war)*;*

*-an activity undertaken by a political unit (such as a nation) to weaken or destroy another: economic warfare*

*-struggle between competing entities:* [*conflict*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conflict)*[[4]](#footnote-4)*

One thing to keep in mind is that warfare doesn’t necessarily have to fit with our stereotype of war. The phrase “preemptive warfare” (at least for me) conjures up images of camouflaged Delta Force soldiers rappelling out of helicopters and attacking a rogue nuclear regime, as black-clothed henchmen load the last biological weapon into its launcher. But preemptive warfare doesn’t always have to be the stuff of action movies. Broadly defined, the mantle of preemptive warfare could cover various mercantilist economic practices, arms export controls, treaties, or the type of sudden military action that accords with our preexisting ideals of preemption.

# The Caroline Doctrine

There’s still an important term in the resolution that we haven’t yet explored, and that term is “morally justified.” The standard for the moral viability of preemptive warfare is based on something called the Caroline Doctrine, which has a bit of a backstory. The story is set in 1837, when a group of Canadian rebels wanted to replicate the American Revolution by breaking away from England. This was doomed to failure from the start, because 1) Canadians aren’t really rebel material, and 2) Britain had already lost the U.S., and so they weren’t about to lose their last strategic foothold in North America. But, because Americans 1) had a thing for lost causes, 2) hated England, and 3) loved fighting and independence, the Canadian rebels were able to have some success recruiting American volunteers to aid them. Somewhere, the insurgents had gotten a ship, a steamer called the *Caroline,* and they used it to ferry fighters around the northern U.S. and southern Canada. One night in December 1837, the British authorities had had enough, so they boarded the *Caroline*, set the ship on fire, and sent her over Niagara Falls, killing two American citizens. Next May, in typical U.S. fashion, an American citizen led a force of Canadians in an assault on the British Navy ship *Sir Robert Peel*. They captured, looted, and burned it.

That episode came to be known as the Caroline Affair, and it gave rise to a correspondence between the U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster, and the British Special Minister, Lord Ashburton. That correspondence between two of the preeminent statesmen of history led to the Caroline Doctrine. The doctrine says that preemptive warfare is justified when it fits under, in Webster’s words,

“that necessity of self-defence [sic], instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means.”

The Caroline Doctrine gives rise to a lot of questions. If the standards of preemptive warfare are (1) self-defense, (2) instant, overwhelming necessity, or (3) no other option, we have to ask ourselves some relatively deep philosophical questions:

* Should we really place self-defense above the lives of others?
* If preemptive warfare kills more people than it saves, who cares which nation won?
* What defines an instant, overwhelming necessity?
* Can we quantify that necessity, or do we have to trust our gut?
* Are we ever really out of other options?
* How do we know our safety is threatened?
* How can we be certain of a future event?

At its most basic, this resolution can sidestep all of those questions with philosophical conflicts surrounding preemptive warfare.

# Philosophical Conflicts

The first philosophic conflict to explore is that between nationalism and globalism. Nationalism says that government’s job is to protect its people, not the people of the world. Globalism says that people everywhere are important, and so killing them before they attack is akin to murder. Nationalism is the “America First” mindset, globalism is the “United in Diversity” mindset. There are arguments for both. Many people agree that the government of the U.S. should care more for the citizens of America than the citizens of other countries.

However, basic ethics claims that all life is valuable. If you fall firmly on the nationalist side, preemptive warfare is common sense, because national security is the highest duty of government, no matter the cost. If you’re a hardcore globalist, even a 99.999999% chance of an imminent attack doesn’t justify preemption. Taking life prior to an offense equates to state-sponsored terrorism, with all the attendant slippery slopes and injustices.

Another philosophy to explore is Epistemology. This is the study of knowledge, which can help us understand what we know and how we know it. For example, in 2002, President Bush used intelligence of chemical weapons to justify a preemptive invasion of Iraq.[[5]](#footnote-5) Under Bush’s predecessor President Obama, American troops withdrew from Iraq in 2011, and some scholars believe the power vacuum we left behind gave ISIS an opening.[[6]](#footnote-6) Preemptive war isn’t entirely to blame, but that example illustrates how hard it is to foretell the results of any action. On the other hand, analysts also blame President Obama for calling ISIS the “JV” team, and then refusing to preemptively weaken ISIS by arming Syrian opposition groups.[[7]](#footnote-7) The point is, with 20/20 historical hindsight, it’s easy to tell when preemption worked and when it failed. But in real life, both sides of the resolution carry attendant risks. Vote aff and you risk killing millions of people for no reason. Vote neg and you risk letting millions of people get killed, even though you could have stopped it.

Pragmatism is closely linked to epistemology, in that it deals with the effectiveness of preemptive warfare. Sometimes, preemption ends up hurting the nation that uses it. For example, December 7th, 1941 wasn’t just a disaster for the U.S. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor led to Japan’s loss in WWII, the annihilation of two cities by two atomic bombs, and Japan’s current limitation on offensive military capabilities. Even though the preemptive strike was effective, unexpected, and executed well, Japan is worse off for it. On the other hand, if you have a pretty good idea a war is coming, and you don’t preemptively strike, you’re giving the enemy a leg up.

Now, you might be thinking, “Mark…stop. This resolution is about the *morality* of a strike, not the *effect* of one. Besides, isn’t pragmatism an ethically immoral philosophy?” The answer is three-fold. First, morality is inextricably linked to effectiveness, and good intentions don’t compensate for bad results. Second, governments are obligated to operate more pragmatically than citizens. It’s alright for a citizen to give all his or her money to charity, but a government that does so is failing in its obligations. Third, value debate is almost always pragmatic. That may sound crazy, but hear me out. You propose an absolute value, and say that your side of the resolution leads to that value. Your opponent gets up and argues that your side of the resolution doesn’t achieve your value. You’re both arguing pragmatically about the best way to reach an abstract ideal.

# Examples

Finally, we should cover some examples of preemptive warfare. Since there will be an entire article dedicated to applications, we’ll just skim the top of the well of representative instances. We’ve covered the 6 Days War, Pearl Harbor, the Iraq War, and the Caroline Affair. In the last 80 odd years, we’ve seen classic examples of preemptive warfare in Austria’s invasion of Serbia,[[8]](#footnote-8) Japan’s takeover of Manchuria,[[9]](#footnote-9) and Adolf Hitler’s quest for *Lebensraum* in Poland and Western Russia.[[10]](#footnote-10) If you want to push the boundaries, research the Chinese economic practices of dumping, mercantilism, intellectual property theft, and subsidization. If you want to be politically edgy, look into Russian hacking. If you want to pull out a hit-or-miss ace card, remember 9/11. Although jihadists refer to the events of September 11, 2001, as an act of revenge, Western nations widely view it as a preemptive strike, and the War on Terror as a response to the preemption.

This overview is designed to give you a head start, so don’t waste it. Take this information and use it to gain knowledge, to refine your arguments, and to build cases. Then, preemptively strike all your opponents with crushing logic and superb rhetoric, because that sort of warfare is always morally justified.

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2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Definition of "pre-emptive" - English Dictionary." *Cambridge English Dictionary Online*. Cambridge Dictionary, n.d. Web. 21 June 2017. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/pre-emptive>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. "Warfare." *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 21 June 2017. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/warfare>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Daalder, Ivo H., and James Lindsay. "The Preemptive-War Doctrine Has Met an Early Death in Iraq" *Brookings* *Institute*, 30 May 2004. Web. 21 June 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-preemptive-war-doctrine-has-met-an-early-death-in-iraq/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Schmitt, Tim and Arango, Eric. "Baghdadi of ISIS Pushes an Islamist Crusade." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 10 Aug. 2014. Web. 21 June 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/world/middleeast/us-actions-in-iraq-fueled-rise-of-a-rebel.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. "Austria-Hungary Declares War on Serbia." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 21 June 2017. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/austria-hungary-declares-war-on-serbia>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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