Resolved to Resolve Early  
Resolutional Overview by Mark Csoros



Hello, and welcome to the 2019 NCFCA Lincoln Douglas debate season. This resolutional overview is intended to give you the best possible introduction to this year’s resolution, and I hope that you use it to jump-start your research on the topic. We’ll go over the key terms of the resolution, take a quick dip into the ethics of war, and close out this article with a look at a few philosophies that will likely factor into this debate.

# Key Terms

Let’s start by going over the term that needs the most defining: preventive war.

## Preventive War Part 1: The Definitions

Collins English dictionary leads off, defining preventive war as:

*an*[*attack*](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/attack)*against a*[*possible*](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/possible)[*enemy*](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/enemy)*to*[*prevent*](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/prevent)*an attack by that enemy at a later time.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

I like this definition, especially for the negative side, because it highlights how preventive war is inherently based on hypotheticals. By engaging in preventive war, a nation is assuming (based on credible or incredible evidence) that a possible enemy will attack at some point in the future. That’s a key point to keep in mind, because we can’t be sure a war will occur, even though the word “preventive” implies it. The Hoover Institution’s definition is a bit more Aff weighted, saying:

*A preventive war is a military, diplomatic, and strategic endeavor, aimed at an enemy whom one expects to grow so strong that delay would cause defeat.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Here, the definition emphasizes that preemptive war may be a necessary recourse, or at least seem to be necessary at the time of the ordered strike.

## Preventive War Part 2: Preventive vs. Preemptive

There are key differences between preventive and preemptive wars, their connotations, and their relationship to each other. There are also (unsurprisingly) differing schools of thought on what each term means. The Hoover Institution tells us that

*“…two words,*preemptive and preventive*, have gained increasing currency. While similar in meaning, their context is crucial in understanding their applicability...A* preemptive strike *usually carries the connotation of attacking or destroying substantial enemy capabilities, in some cases with the hope that it will so wreck the enemy’s military forces that he will not be able to use them effectively, should war result. In the largest sense, those who execute preventive strikes have usually understood that their military effort, no matter how successful, would lead to a conflict of some indeterminate length. Thus, the two words are directly tied together in that*preemptive strike*almost inevitably will lead to what the attacker in most cases regards as a*preventive war*.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Pretty straightforward. A preemptive strike starts a preventive war. However, a book review in the Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews gives a different perspective on the standard distinction between preemption and prevention. It says:

*Preventive war is controversial because it involves military attack in the absence of two commonly accepted justifications: self-defense and so-called preemption. Wars of self-defense are said to be justified (when they are) because they involve countries' responding to (unjust) initiations of military force. Wars of preemption are said to be justified (when they are) because they involve countries' responding to an imminent threat of an (unjust) initiation of force. The rationale for the latter is that one need not wait until unjust aggressors actually initiate their attacks before self-defense becomes permissible.*

*Commonly, the permissibility of such preemptive attacks is thought to be subject to rather strict conditions of imminence -- conditions tracing back to the 1837 Caroline case. On this view, preemptive attacks are permissible only if the threat of unjust aggression is "instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means and no moment for deliberation." (32) The case for preventive (as opposed to preemptive) war attempts to stretch the condition of imminence beyond this. Preventive wars respond to threats of attack that may be further in the future and more uncertain.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

The Caroline case will come up shortly, so don’t forget about that. In the meantime, this interpretation states that preemption occurs in response to an imminent threat, while preventive wars are fought to nullify a threat that may manifest itself further down the road. Therefore, preemptive wars are less controversial than preventive wars.

## Ethical

Ethics is primarily determined by standards, not definitions, so we won’t spend much time in this section. Merriam-Webster defines ethical as:

*1****:****of or relating to*[*ethics*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics) *(as in ethical theories)*

*2****:****involving or expressing moral approval or disapproval (as in ethical judgments)*

*3****:****conforming to accepted standards of conduct (as in ethical behavior)[[5]](#footnote-5)*

The first definition doesn’t clarify things much, the second isn’t really relevant to the resolution, and so the third is the one that actually helps us understand what the resolution asks. So, in the debate about the ethics of preventive war, what standards determine accepted standards of conduct?

# The Ethics of War

## Ethics Part 1: Just War Theory

Scholars have debated over the ethics of war for a long time. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas are the two most famous philosophers in the field of just war theory, and their musings have been distilled into six key criteria that determine whether or not a war is just. These criteria are nicely presented by Dr. Michael Lacewing, a great practical and theoretical philosopher. He writes:

*The following six criteria have been suggested for a war to be just. The first three are deontological, the last three are based on securing the best consequences.*

1. *War must be in a just cause. There is disagreement over what constitutes a just cause. Examples offered are self-defense, the defense of others from aggressive attack, the protection of innocent people from aggressive regimes, or corrective punishment for aggression past action. All involve the ‘resistance of aggression’, the violation of basic rights by use of armed force. We can also argue that only a legitimate state can begin a war with just cause. To be legitimate, a state must be recognized as legitimate by its citizens and by other states; it must not violate the rights of other legitimate states; and it must respect the basic rights of its citizens.*
2. *The right intention for fighting the war is because it is in a just cause. Any other intention, e.g. material gain, undermines the justice of the war.*
3. *The decision to go to war must be made with the proper authority (usually laid down in the state’s constitution) and by a public declaration.*
4. *The declaration of war must be a last resort, following the exhaustion of all plausible alternatives means to resolving the conflict.*
5. *A declaration of war can only be just if the state can foresee a probability of success in resolving the conflict through war. Violence without likely gain cannot be justified.*
6. *The response of declaring war must be proportionate, i.e. the good that can be secured through war must outweigh the evil that will most likely occur. The end must justify the means. And in this calculation, the state must take into account not just the costs and benefits to itself, but those that will affect everyone involved in the war (e.g. including enemy casualties).[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Dr. Lacewing is British, so he spells “defense” incorrectly, but his explanation of ethical war (i.e. war conforming to accepted standards) gives us a lot to mull over. I’d like to especially draw your attention to items four and six on the list of criteria, and the questions they raise. Is a preventive war really a last resort if it happens before an attack? Can a preventive war be proportionate if you aren’t sure you’ll be attacked? And isn’t “preventive war” an oxymoron, since launching an attack is sure to start a war?

## Ethics Part 2: The Caroline Doctrine and Preventive War

It’s impossible to talk about preventive war without talking about the Caroline Doctrine, which has a bit of a backstory. That backstory story begins 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 had some success recruiting American volunteers. 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. The next May, in typical American fashion, a U.S. 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 preventive warfare is justified when it fits under, in Webster’s words,

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

The Caroline Doctrine gives rise to a lot of questions. If the standards of preventive 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?

Let’s look at some of the philosophies that try to answer those questions.

# Philosophical Conflicts

## Consequentialism, Utilitarianism, and Debate

This first bit is related to the resolution, but it’s also an opportunity for me to tell you about one of my pet peeves. I very much dislike it when debaters say something like “that’s a consequentialist mindset” or “the ends can never justify the means” or “my opponent’s argument is utilitarian and therefore you can’t vote for it”. First, the judge can vote any way he jolly well pleases. Second, not only are those bad debate tactics, no high school debater (or college, post-grad, Ph.D., or genius debater) should throw away any argument merely because it originates in a certain school of philosophical thought. With that said, let’s take a second to walk through why these terms aren’t boogeymen attempting to steal morality from innocent LD debaters. Bear in mind that the following is not intended to convince you to run these arguments or adopt these philosophies as your guiding principles, but rather to show you why they don’t deserve immediate dismissal.

Consequentialism just means that we measure the morality of an action by the result of the action. We use consequentialism all the time, especially when we’re talking about government action. A government that passes an Affordable Care Act isn’t isolated from the results of that policy just because the intention was good. Utilitarianism means that we measure morality by what’s best for the most people. This can be scary, because it sounds like tyranny of the majority, but it makes a lot of sense when it’s framed correctly. Under a utilitarian mindset, it isn’t alright for a government to randomly kill one person every year in order to protect the majority, though debaters who oppose utilitarianism often assert that this is a fair representation of the philosophy. This would set a terrible precedent for government power, and so utilitarianism would reject this course of action, under most circumstances. Finally, please don’t ask “can the ends ever justify the means” in CX, or assert that “the ends can never justify the means”. The assertion is wrong and the question is meaningless, because it all depends on what the ends and means are. If the means is spending $5 and the end is obtaining a meal, it’s probably justified that you went to Subway. If the means is obtaining a firearm and the end is committing homicide, the ends almost certainly do not justify the means.

## Nationalism and Globalism

Put simply, 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, preventive 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 a future attack doesn’t justify prevention. Taking life prior to an offense equates to state-sponsored terrorism, with all the attendant slippery slopes and injustices.

## Epistemology

Epistemology 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 the alleged presence of chemical weapons (which were never found) to justify an invasion of Iraq.[[7]](#footnote-7) Under President Obama, American troops withdrew from Iraq in 2011, and some scholars believe the power vacuum we left behind gave ISIS an opening.[[8]](#footnote-8) Bush’s arguably unnecessary invasion shows why preventive warfare is a gamble: we don’t always know what we thing we know. 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.[[9]](#footnote-9) 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 causing unnecessary death. Vote neg and you risk allowing unnecessary death.

**Pragmatism**

Pragmatism is closely linked to epistemology, and is an offshoot of consequentialism, in that it deals with the effectiveness of an action. Sometimes, preventive war ends up hurting the nation that uses it. For example, 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 use preventive war, you’re giving the enemy a leg up.

# In Conclusion

Of course, this overview isn’t an exhaustive treatise on everything you need to know to debate effectively about the ethics of preventive war. But, it is a place to start. From here, I hope that you go on to become an expert in wartime ethics, global policy, and philosophy, and that you use that expertise to debate with excellence and live as an informed citizen. I wish y’all the best.

1. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/preventive-war> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.hoover.org/research/preemptive-strikes-and-preventive-wars-historians-perspective> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.hoover.org/research/preemptive-strike-or-preventive-war> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-ethics-of-preventive-war/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethical> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/9781138793934/A2/Political/JustWarTheory.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 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-7)
8. 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-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)