Prevention through History  
Applications Summary by Alisa Stringer



Warfare is never simple. The factors that determine when, where, and how a nation goes to war are often difficult to identify. The purpose of this article is to help debaters sort out examples of preventive warfare, and perhaps more elusive, examples where preventive warfare was an unused option. This article purposefully examines applications from all throughout history. Preventive warfare is not a new concept, and to understand modern military theory, it is first essential to understand what tactics nation’s have already tried.

To find example of preventive warfare, debaters first need to understand the essential aspects of prevention. Oxford English Dictionary defines a preventive war as “a war initiated by one state, faction, etc., in anticipation of (suspected) hostile intentions on the part of another.” Because warfare simply describes “the action of carrying on, or engaging in, war,” we can summarize that preventive warfare is the act of engaging in war due to suspected hostile intentions of another state.

In addition to the essential aspects of preventive warfare, there are also some common themes among applications. First, preventive warfare is often a step taken by a stronger state striking first to keep a weaker state from power. Second, preventive warfare usually involves some sort of unreliable information source. Finally, preventive warfare requires that the nation who strikes completely eradicates the perceived threat, if the strike is to succeed.

Below are some of the most impactful cases of preventive warfare throughout history. Some can be easily defended as both strategic and moral, some were strategically sound but not ethical, and some ended in complete disaster. Each example holds a unique place in the conversation surrounding this resolution

# Historical Cases

## Peloponnesian War – 431 B.C.

The first application on this list of preventive wars is a fifth century Greek conflict. Cornell Historian Barry Strauss wrote an article for the Hoover Institution, where he said that,

“The Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) is the granddaddy of all preventive wars. The Peloponnesians, led by Sparta, decided to make war on Athens less because of a series of disputes dividing the two blocs than because of the future that they feared, one in which Athens’ growing power would break apart Sparta’s alliance system. The Athenians wanted to decide the two sides’ dispute via arbitration, but the Spartans refused, which cost Sparta the moral high ground. Before Athens and Sparta could fight a proper battle, the war began. Sparta’s ally, Thebes, launched a preemptive strike on the nearby city and Athenian ally, Plataea.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Professor Strauss clearly considers Sparta’s preventive warfare to be unethical. Starting a war for fear of weakened alliances sounds like a highly unproportionally response. However, Sparta rightly understood that alliances are essential to a state’s growth and safety. This application highlights the conflict between the right strategic decision and the ethical decision.

## Third Punic War – 130 B.C.

No list of warfare tactics could be complete without an example from Roman history. The Romans were known as ruthless and brutal, for good reason. Perhaps the best example of Roman preventive warfare is the destruction of Carthage. The following is an excerpt from West Point Professor Scott A. Silverstone’s work on preventive war.

“For one Roman politician, Cato the Elder, the only lasting solution to this amorphous yet gripping fear was obvious, and he ended every Senate speech by reminding his fellow Romans of this solution with one simple phrase: “Carthage must be destroyed.” And in the end, this is exactly how Rome solved its nagging security dilemma. In 150 BC Carthage violated its peace treaty with Rome by taking up arms in a local dispute with the neighboring kingdom of Numidia, without the Roman Senate’s approval. There was nothing about this localized North African border conflict that directly threatened Rome or its increasingingly far-flung interests. There was nothing about this treaty violation that demanded more than a sharp yet proportionate reminder that as a “friend and ally” or Rome, Carthage must respect its rules. Yet for Rome, this was an opportunity to unleash the preventive war temptation that had festered for decades, along with Carthage’s growing latent power. The Third Punic War ended four years later with the utter annihilation of the city and the enslavement of its surviving population, an end that would ensure that the Carthaginians’ resilience would remain just a memory. Through preventive war, Rome eliminated its Carthage problem forever.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

If we leave this example here, it seems like a clear case for the effectiveness, if not the ethicality, of preventive warfare. However, when we study the context of the Third Punic War, a different picture emerges. There was a reason that Carthage was on Rome’s hit list; namely, Hannibal had engaged in preventive warfare against Rome not too long ago. As Dr. Silverstone explains,

“Here we have the preventive war paradox taken to its terrible extreme: In the long run, Hannibal’s preventive war, launched to sustain Carthaginian security by knocking down its main rival, undercut its security by generating such hostility and fear that the city of Carthage suffered the equivalent of death.”

The complex effect of preventive warfare is impossible to predict. Rome’s actions prove that preventive warfare can be effective, at least for a period of time. Hannibal’s actions prove that preventive warfare can have unintentional and devastating results.

## Nine Years War – 1688 A.D.

French King Louis XIV is perhaps best known for renovating Versailles into a renowned and extravagant palace. Louis XIV knew the power that resources wield, and he understood that resources in the ‘wrong’ hands were a threat. In *The Origins of Major War,* Professor Dale C. Copeland argued that,

“Louis and his advisers thus saw preventive war against the Austrian sphere and the Spanish Netherlands as a way not only to protect France’s vulnerable eastern border, but to position France for a later fight for the vast Spanish possession. Absorbing at least some of these possessions would help France compete against English and Dutch commerce, especially in the lucrative Levant-Mediterranean trade. Even more important, it would prevent these territories from falling into the hands of the rising Austrian state.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

A war for resources may seem unnecessary, but resources directly impact lives through safety, health, and economic concerns. In waging a preventive resource war, Louis XIV was building the resources and prestige of a powerful country.

## Napoleon’s Russian Campaign – 1811 A.D.

Preventive warfare often involves occupation. It is not enough to attack, a nation must also assert its dominance by either subjugating opposing citizens or leading them to revolt. Such was the case with Napoleon I, who responded to rumors of a planned Russian attack on France. Dr. Stanley Kober analyzed Napoleons actions for the Cato Institute.

“The dilemma is illustrated by the different approach to preventive war adopted by Napoleon and Bismarck. By 1811, Napoleon had decided to initiate war with Russia, having been convinced by reports that Tsar Alexander I was preparing to attack France. His former ambassador to Russia, General Armand de Caulain court, was dismayed. “The Emperor repeated all the fantastic stories which, to please him, were fabricated in Danzig, in the Duchy of Warsaw, and even in the north of Germany — stories the accuracy of which had been disproved time and again,” he recounted in his memoirs. But Napoleon, convinced of easy victory, could not be dissuaded. Initially, the war justified Napoleon’s confidence. He crushed the Russian army in the battle of Borodino, and his army proceeded to occupy Moscow. The tsar, however, did not surrender. Worse, the Russian people did not respond to Napoleon’s promise of liberation but instead resisted the foreign occupation; the people of Moscow even burned their own city. With the specter of disaster looming over him, Napoleon ordered a retreat. As his army disintegrated, his allies deserted him, and ultimately he was forced to surrender and submit to exile.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Napoleon’s Russian campaign illustrates the difficulty of obtaining reliable intelligence. The morality of a preventive attack may rest on the actual intentions of possibly threating countries. The problem is that nations never know the actual intentions of other nations, and incorrect intelligence is a dangerous fault, for both strategic and ethical reasons.

# Modern Cases

## Cuban Missile Crisis - 1962

While the Cuban Missile Crisis is well-known as a time of high tension, it is often overlooked in discussions of preventive warfare. However, the Cuban Missile Crisis is, in fact, one of the best examples where preventive warfare was considered – and rejected. In 1962, President Ronald Reagan said that,

“The 1930's taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked, ultimately leads to war. This nation is opposed to war. We are also true to our word. Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The president went on to describe why action was needed against Cuba. He argued that American security was threatened by “offensive military capability in Cuba,”5 and that Congress had decided to “prevent by whatever means may be necessary, including the use of arms”5 Marxist activity in Cuba.

Yet despite the clear possibility of harm, the United States did not engage in preventive warfare. Preventive warfare could have been well justified for the safety and security of American citizens, yet if the President had acted preventively, it could very well have led to a nuclear war.

## Operation Opera - 1981

Israel’s strike against Iraq’s nuclear reactor was one of the most successful attacks in modern history. For very little cost, Israel was able to destroy a target that they saw as a major threat to their nation. At the time of the strike, there were dissenting voices in Israel suggesting that no action should be taken. But as time went on with no outside help, Israel chose to act. Professor William Spaniel explained that:

“Israel pushed forward with Operation Opera and saw a resounding success. In doing so, Israel banked on a subdued response from the international community. The cabinet was correct-backlash against Operation Opera proved inconsequential.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

Spaniel argued that Israel lost very little, had little-to-no international retribution, and still managed to alert the international community to their commitment to keeping Iraq from nuclear weapons. He also analyzed the direct effect that Israel’s preventive strike had on Iraq’s nuclear capability.

“After Operation Opera, Iraq updated its beliefs about Israeli willingness to intervene and strategically altered its path to proliferation. But the further investment proved futile. Throwing money at the problem could not provide a solution given that indigenous nuclear know-how was insufficient to produce a bomb (Kreps and Fuhrmann 2011, 171-172; Hymans 2012, 84-93). This forced Iraq to look for partners. But Israel believed Operation Opera was worthwhile in part to signal other countries to stay away (Perlmutter, Handel, and Bar-Joseph 2003, 79). The effort succeeded – France pulled out, and no other nuclear power was willing to replace France's technological know-how. Iraq instead had to rely on the A.Q. Khan nuclear black market, and much of the extra spending went toward hiding the program from the eyes of the international community. A decade later, at the start of the Persian Gulf War, Iraq still lacked a bomb despite no further direct intervention on its nuclear program.”6

Operation Opera was successful and effective. In addition, the strike itself involved few casualties, given the size of the operation.

## Iraq War - 2003

President Bush’s War in Iraq was the event that brought preventive warfare, and preemptive warfare, back into US military discussions. The president labeled his doctrine as preemption, but most analysts saw the action as preventive. It was a war undertaken to prevent Saddam Hussein from obtaining nuclear weapons, for fear of what he might do with such a capability. Professor Scott Silverstone examined the War in Iraq in his book, *From Hitler's Germany to Saddam's Iraq: The Enduring False Promise of Preventive War.*

“So did the United States “win” the Iraq War? It certainly achieved the operational military objectives linked to the preventive motivation for this conflict. AN Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein’s rule, in possession of weapons of mass destruction, is no longer a future scenario the United States must fret about. But did preventive war actually save the United States from a future in which this threat materialized? Given the fact that Iraq had no active WMD programs in 2003, and no evidence was found that would have allowed rapid regeneration of these dangerous capabilities in coming year, it is impossible to conclude that the United States really achieved the strategic goals set for this preventive war. When put in the context of the broader political order left in this war’s wake, the “state of peace” the United States faced as the post-invasion years slipped by seems worse than the state of peace America endured while Saddam Hussein was still alive, in power, and subdued.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Iraq application demonstrates the importance of accurate intelligence in determining the strategic, and moral, grounds for preventive warfare. In a world where information travels across the globe in seconds, nations still face the same decisions that ancient Rome and medieval France have faced in the past. In order to justify preventive warfare, every nation must decide whether power is worth killing for, and whether waiting for threatening rumors to be realized is worth dying for.

1. Strauss, Barry. "Preemptive Strikes and Preventive Wars: A Historian's Perspective." Hoover Institution, Stanford U, 29 Aug. 2017, www.hoover.org/research/preemptive-strikes-and-preventive-wars-historians-perspective. Accessed 22 July 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Silverstone, Scott A. *From Hitler's Germany to Saddam's Iraq: The Enduring False Promise of Preventive War*. 2019. Print. Pp. 87-88 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Copeland, Dale C. *The Origins of Major War*. Brantford, Ont: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2009. Print. Pp. 221 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kober, Stanley. "What Napoleon and Bismarck Teach Us About Preventive War." Cato Institute, 18 Sept. 2004, www.cato.org/publications/commentary/what-napoleon-bismarck-teach-us-about-preventive-war. Accessed 22 July 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “President John F. Kennedy’s Speech Announcing the Quarantine Against Cuba, October 22, 1962.” *Mount Holyoke College*, www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kencuba.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Spaniel, William. Bargaining over the Bomb: The Successes and Failures of Nuclear Negotiations. 2015. U of Rochester, PhD dissertation. Pp. 308-309 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Silverstone, Scott A. From Hitler's Germany to Saddam's Iraq: The Enduring False Promise of Preventive War. 2019. Print. Pp. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)