Three Paths  
Strategy Overview by Mark Csoros



Because the ethics of preventive war revolve around situational ethics, we have to settle a few questions before we can really debate in a clear and informed manner. First and foremost, we have to decide whether preventive war is ethical all the time, none of the time, or some of the time. Once you’ve answered this question, you can decide on a strategy based on the answer you adopt. This Strategy Overview will walk through some of the general strategies debaters can use, depending on how they want to approach the resolution.

# All the time (Aff)

Obviously, the affirmative is the only side that would choose this path. To argue that preventive war is ethical all the time, you would need to appeal strongly to a nationalist ideology. By that, I mean that you would need to convince the judge that the government has a strong primary responsibility to its citizens, and that preventive war is ethical because it fulfills that responsibility.

The negative will likely argue, in response, that governments also have an obligation to the citizens of the world. While that obligation may not be as strong as a government’s obligation to its citizens, if all men are created equal, then a preventive war under the wrong circumstances will take life where there is no need.

In response, argue that all wars require governments to face this conundrum. Presumably, your opponent will agree that at least some wars are ethical, which means that they agree that governments ought to prioritize the safety of their citizens above the safety of non-nationals. Therefore, the ethic of preventive war is just an extension of the ethics of regular war.

On negative, the best response to this response is that a preventive war necessarily occurs before a nation is directly under attack. Therefore, preventive war represents a government gambling away the lives of non-citizens in the hope of preventing future potential losses of domestic life. The impact is that even if the lives of non-citizens are less valuable to a government than the lives of its own citizens, we aren’t justified in sacrificing those lives “just in case”.

At this point, the way to win this calculus argument is either by taking a hardline stance or pulling out a trick up your sleeve. The hardline stance says that because the government has such a deep commitment to the well-being of its citizens, any credible threat from another nation requires a preventive war. The trick strategy is to agree with your opponent. Yes, you read that right. You can say something along the lines of “I agree with my opponent about his commitment to preserving all human life. That’s exactly why I support preventive war. Preventive war, where one nation is unprepared, allows for a briefer conflict that results in less loss of life. Allowing a nation that intends us harm to prepare itself and then launch an attack, rather than nipping the attack in the bud with a preventive war, would mean that two fully prepared powers are engaged in all-out conflict. A preventive war is the strategy that best protects human life across the board.” To add additional strength to this response, you can couple the hardline and trick strategies together and impact with double weight.

# None of the time (NEG)

Again, only the negative would argue that preventive war is never ethical. This strategy can rely on the previously mentioned commitment to protecting all human life, focus on the epistemological argument “we don’t KNOW there will be an attack”, or use a combination of the two arguments. This strategy will require you to place a heavy emphasis on the ethics of war, so I highly recommend you make use of the Resolutional Overview article to brush up on Just War Theory.

The key aspect of Just War Theory, under this strategy, is proportionality. In a conventional war, proportionality is determined by the strength of the tactics used when compared to the affront done to a country. A full-scale attack on a nation’s borders could reasonably be met with a full-scale war. Shooting down a plane in neutral airspace might result in sanctions, asset seizure, and other measures reminiscent of wartime actions, without actual physical intervention. Attacking an embassy might be met with retaliatory strikes on a few military installations. In all these cases, the punishment has to fit the crime.

When applied to preventive war, the question becomes “what is a proportional response to a possibility?”. An attack hasn’t occurred yet. No lives have been lost. An attack may come in the future, but an attack may always come in the future. If you’re running this strategy, put a burden on your opponent to specify what line must be crossed to justify a preventive war. Is it a buildup of military force? Nations do that all the time, without necessarily intending to attack. Is it military intelligence that points to a future attack? How far in the future? Aren’t there diplomatic options? How can we sacrifice innocent life based on a possibility?

At its core, this strategy is a series of epistemological questions. How do we know if an attack is coming? How can we be proportionate if we don’t know yet what the attack will be? How can we know any future event, since things are subject to change? If you make a strong case for the value of human life, and convince the judge that we cannot squander human life based on potentiality, then this strategy may just work out for you.

# Some of the time

This is by far the most likely option, because it’s difficult to prove that anything is ethical of unethical 100% of the time. To argue along this path, we have to decide which situations lead to ethical preventive war, and in which situations preventive war is unethical. Then, we can look at the real world and decide if aff or neg reaches the standard necessary to win the debate.

One of the important things to point out, in this resolution, is that preemptive war is only an option under a very particular set of circumstances, and that it only has a high likelihood of success under an even more particular set of circumstances. Consider what the Hoover Institution has to say about the risks of preventive wars, in support of this “sometimes” view:

*To sum up, preventive wars and preemptive strikes work only under certain conditions. If the attacker carries out a brilliant operation, has overwhelming military superiority, is able to mobilize political support particularly at home but also abroad, and is willing to pay a heavy price and bear a long burden in case the war drags on, then one of those two moves might make sense. States lacking those strengths would do best to avoid such risky endeavors.*

On one hand, the combination of all of those factors seems prohibitively rare, making preemptive war a bad idea (and thus unethical, under the assumption that governments are ethically bound to make the best decision for their nation). On the other hand, most of the examples out there come from nations that have these qualities.

To extend this a bit, there are certainly situations where preventive war is possible, but not ethical. Noting that there are terrorist elements in Lebanon that intend to destroy the U.S. likely doesn’t justify a ground invasion of Lebanon. In the same way, finding out that Iran has a plan to attack the U.S. with a fifteen-year timeline doesn’t justify a preemptive war.

The difficult part, here, is to avoid a pure applications debate. LD isn’t meant to be won by the debater with the most applications, and it’s a bad strategy to throw as many examples at the judge as possible and hope you win by sheer numbers. Instead, the more difficult, but more effective strategy is to prove logically that the bulk of these situations are such that we should adopt or reject the resolution. To do that well, you have to frame the resolution well.

## Aff Framing Under “Some of the Time”

On affirmative, I’d recommend framing the resolution as an absolute that leans in your favor. By that I mean that voting negative takes the option of preventive war off the table, while voting affirmative allows us to keep preventive war in our toolbox. Affirming that preventive war is ethical doesn’t mean that preventive war is always ethical, just as non-preventive war isn’t always ethical. But affirming the resolution does mean that preventive war can be ethical, and is an important tool for national defense.

## Neg Framing Under “Some of the Time”

On negative, I’d recommend framing the resolution in terms of the 51% rule. In LD debate, this traditionally means that voting for one side or the other doesn’t mean that either side is totally right, but that a majority of the time (51% or more) we should agree with one particular side of the resolution. In this case, you would argue that voting Neg doesn’t mean preventive war is always unethical, and voting Aff doesn’t mean that preventive war is always ethical, but rather that voting Neg acknowledges that preventive war is unethical more often than it is ethical. To prove this, the best way is to combine all the long odds arguments you can muster. Highlight the all the situations where a nation lacks appropriate cause, knowledge, resources, or support for a preventive war. Those situations are clearly more than 51% of the time, which means that while preventive war may be ethical in certain select situations, the bulk of the time it is unethical, and the ballot should go to you.

# In Conclusion

These strategies are only a rough sketch of strategies that will become more developed as the season progresses. I would be remiss if I presented this article as a golden key that will open all the doors to competitive success, because arguments become better as they become tested in-round. However, these strategies will be an asset to you in your research and case-writing, as long as you use them as an aide to, and not a substitute for, due diligence and critical thinking. Best of luck this year!