Government Obligation  
Affirmative Case by Zachary Beddingfield



This year, many debaters will challenge each other on the basis of ethics and on why Preventive War either falls into the “ethical” or “unethical” category. This case takes a different tact. Instead of trying to define a framework of ethics to place Preventive War within, this case makes the claim that, when a government’s citizens’ rights are at risk, the only ethical course a government can take is that which aims to defend them. Therefore, when government choses to enact Preventive War, they are acting ethically because they are taking the route they have deemed as best for their citizens.

The key to winning with this case is two-fold. First, you must emphasize that a government whose citizens are threatened can only act ethically by taking the route they deem best to defend their people, immediately shutting down any suggestions by your opponent to the contrary. Secondly, you must continually reiterate that a government choosing to enact Preventive Warfare is, by definition, always doing so in an effort to protect their nation and, by extension, their citizens.

Other important factors of this case are its contentions, which hinge directly on the definition. They establish that, under the definition, Preventive War is both a) only utilized when government believes delaying would mean unalterable defeat and b) only used as a last resort. This holds off two fundamental Negative attacks: First, that Preventive War is too presumptuous in its expectation of future war and secondly that Preventive War means leaving peace options behind, because as we’ve established, government has already deemed war inevitable and any future conflict to be impossible to win. Therefore, they are acting ethically because their only course of action to defend the citizens’ rights is that of Preventive War.

As the Negative, the best way to deal with this case is to reject the definition given in favor of one less extreme in its criteria for what qualifies as Preventive War, followed by countering the idea that government cannot act unethically when defending its people. Once you do so, you should be able to disprove the contentions, because they fail in the presence of a Negative-sided definition. If you can then persuade your judge that Preventive War is unethical in spite of government using it to try and protect their citizens, due to it being too extreme in its actions, you’ve won the round.

# Government Obligation

The following is an excerpt from History.com:

On June 5, 1967, the Israel Defense Forces initiated Operation Focus, a coordinated aerial attack on Egypt. That morning, some 200 aircraft took off from Israel and swooped west over the Mediterranean before converging on Egypt from the north.

After catching the Egyptians by surprise, they assaulted 18 different airfields and eliminated roughly 90 percent of the Egyptian air force as it sat on the ground.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Today, this attack and its aftermath make up what is know as the six-day war, in which Israelian forces launched a preventive attack on Egypt and other surrounding nations who were encroaching on their lands and threatening to eradicate them.1 You see, Israel had a choice: sit back and await a formal declaration of war from the enemy, which would have all but guaranteed total destruction, or strike first in a preventive measure to protect their citizens from the threat of the future conflict. Israel chose the latter, and this examples serves to illustrate why I stand resolved that **Preventive War is Ethical.**

# Definitions

In an article located in the Hoover Institution, Cornell history professor Barry Strauss explains preventive war in this way:

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. A preemptive strike is a military operation or series of operations to preempt an enemy’s ability to attack you. In both cases, [Furthermore,] a government judges a diplomatic solution to be impossible.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are two key take-aways here:

1. Preventive war is waged because delaying any further is believed to mean inevitable defeat.
2. A government has already exhausted all diplomatic solutions, and Preventive War exists only as a last resort.

# Resolution Analysis: Government’s Obligation to the Citizens

The resolution states that “Preventive War is Ethical,” and by our definition we are dealing with a government actor. Before we go any farther, we should establish what ethical actually means from the perspective of a government. We as normal people have a large variety of ethical obligations to balance in our day-to-day lives. While government shares some of these obligations, there is one key duty of government that must be fulfilled first, before any other government action can be taken. Thomas Jefferson explains this as:

“The purpose of government is to enable the people of a nation to live in safety and happiness.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Democratic senator Arlen Specter reaffirms this view:

“The Fundamental Purpose of government is to protect its citizens.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This leads me to my value, or end goal:

# Value: Citizens’ Rights

If the government fears that the citizens’ rights will be harmed, the only ethical action they can take is that which restores the citizens’ rights. **In other words, whatever government action best protects the citizens’ rights is also the most ethical.** This leads me into my first contention:

# Contention 1: Delay would mean Defeat

As noted by Professor Barry Strauss in his definition of Preventive War, a Preventive War is one waged because a nation believes waiting longer to attack would guarantee defeat. Therefore, the choice of whether or not to initiate a preventive war is a choice between either attacking first or allowing your citizens to be overtaken by a foreign power. Now, generally, attacking first in war is thought to be unethical. However, Preventive Warfare is the exception to this. Government must protect its people, no matter what that requires. Therefore, even if Preventive Warfare requires attacking first, an action which many nations tend to look down on, it is still ethical in nature because it is necessary to protect the citizens.

# Contention 2: Preventive War is a Last Resort

The second feature of Preventive War established in our definition is that a government has already deemed all diplomatic solutions impossible. Preventive War does not require sacrificing all possibility of peace; Preventive War occurs when a nation *believes there is already no possibility of peace*. One example of this we see in history is my application, The Second Peloponnesian War.

## Application: The Second Peloponnesian War[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 431 BC, Sparta attacked Athens. They did this not because of an imminent conflict, but because Athens, their enemy, was growing stronger by the day, threatening to cut them off from their allies and eventually destroy them. The Preventive War that ensued was brutal, and Athens, the bad guy in our story, was all but eradicated. Yes, the war was bloody and violent, but it was still ethical because it was the only option Sparta had left. It was Sparta’s last resort. The actions they took kept their people safe, and today, this example serves to illustrate why Preventive War is both ethical and necessary to fulfill the duty of government to protecting citizens’ rights.

Opposition Brief: Government Obligation

# Government’s Obligation to the Citizens || Citizen’s Rights

**War is Unethical if it Violates Just War Theory**

*Lazar, Seth. “War.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, 3 May 2016. Accessed August 3, 2019.* [*https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/war/#TradRevi*](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/war/#TradRevi)*.*

Traditional just war theory construes *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* as sets of principles, satisfying which is necessary and sufficient for a war’s being permissible. *Jus ad bellum* typically comprises the following six principles:

1. Just Cause: the war is an attempt to avert the right kind of injury.
2. Legitimate Authority: the war is fought by an entity that has the authority to fight such wars.
3. Right Intention: that entity intends to achieve the just cause, rather than using it as an excuse to achieve some wrongful end.
4. Reasonable Prospects of Success: the war is sufficiently likely to achieve its aims.
5. Proportionality: the morally weighted goods achieved by the war outweigh the morally weighted bads that it will cause.
6. Last Resort (Necessity): there is no other less harmful way to achieve the just cause.

# Delay would mean Defeat

**Preventive War is not Founded on the Certainty of War**

*Silverstone, Scott. “Preventive War and Preemption.” Oxford Bibliographies, 2 Mar. 2011, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0053.xml.*

Under preventive war conditions, there is no certainty that this future war will actually be fought; preventive war is launched to avoid the mere possibility of a higher-cost future war or the potential for the target state to use its rising power in a coercive way.

**Preventive War differs from Preemptive War**

*Chatterjee, Deen. “The Ethics of Preventive War // Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews // University of Notre Dame.” Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, 2 Dec. 2013,* [*https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-ethics-of-preventive-war/*](https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-ethics-of-preventive-war/)*.*

[According to the Caroline Doctrine,] preemptive strikes are permissible only if the threat of unjust aggression is “instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means and no moment for deliberation.” 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.

# Preventive War is a Last Resort

**Preventive War is a Fear-Based Reflex**

*Gray, Collin S. “The Implications of Preemptive and Preventive War Doctrines: A Reconsideration.” Army War College, US Government, July 2007, ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB789.pdf.*

A preventive war is a war of discretion … The preventor chooses to wage war, at least to launch military adction, because of its fears for the future should it fail to act now. In other words, the preventor strikes in order to prevent a predicted enemy from changing the balance of power or otherwise behaving in a manner that the preventor would judge to be intolerable … A precautionary war is one waged not out of strong conviction that a dangerous threat is brewing in the target state, but rather because it is suspected that such a threat might one day emerge, and it is better to be safe than sorry.

1. History.com Editors. “Six-Day War.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 11 May 2018. Accessed August 4, 2019. [www.history.com/topics/middle-east/six-day-war](http://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/six-day-war). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Strauss, Barry. “Preemptive Strikes and Preventive Wars: A Historian's Perspective.” *Hoover Institution*, 29 Aug. 2017. Accessed August 4, 2019. [www.hoover.org/research/preemptive-strikes-and-preventive-wars-historians-perspective](http://www.hoover.org/research/preemptive-strikes-and-preventive-wars-historians-perspective). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Thomas Jefferson Quotes.” *AZQuotes*. Accessed August 4, 2019. [www.azquotes.com/quote/371390](http://www.azquotes.com/quote/371390). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Arlen Specter Quotes.” *AllAuthor*. Accessed August 4, 2019. <https://allauthor.com/quotes/55971/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lynch, Patrick. “Athens vs. Sparta: How the Second Peloponnesian War Was Won.” *History Collection*, 8 July 2017, <https://historycollection.co/athens-vs-sparta-second-peloponnesian-war-won/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)