Give Peace a Chance  
Negative Case by “Coach Vance” Trefethen



*Be careful what you ask for when you justify preventive war*

This case argues that Just War Doctrine, the only widely accepted standard for evaluating the morality of warfare, denies the moral acceptability of preventive war.

Preventive war violates the principles of Just War because we can’t know that its cause is just, and because it always violates the principle that war should only be entered as a last resort. Violating these principles matters today because the world is a dangerous place. Lowering the bar and justifying easy entry to war is a really bad idea with nuclear armed paranoids like Kim Jong Un with their finger on the button who feel threatened 24/7 by everything and are itching to pre-empt.

Special note: While the evidence here refers to “pre-emptive” war and there are some semantical differences between “pre-emptive” and “preventive” wars, the differences are not harmful to the Negative position (in fact, they strengthen it). Since “preventive” war (in the classic definitions provided in the literature) would happen long before a “pre-emptive” war would, if pre-emptive war is unjustified, preventive war is even more unjustified. Pre-emptive war happens when the soon-to-be-victim perceives an immediate threat of attack (possibly measured in days or hours). Preventive happens long before that when the eventual victim believes he will ultimately be victimized some longer time in the future but not immediately (measured in months or years). If it’s wrong to wage pre-emptive war to stop a threat coming a day from now, it is even more wrong to wage preventive war to stop a threat from coming a year from now.

Just War

In a utopian world, war would never happen. But in this fallen world we live in, wars are inevitable. As with all actions, we must evaluate the decision to go to war based on moral values, and when we do, you will surely join me in denying that*: Preventive war is ethical.*

# Definition:

Preventive war. According to Dictionary.com citing the Random House Unabridged Dictionary in 2019 QUOTE:

Dictionary.com based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary copyright 2019 <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/preventive-war>

“an attack against a possible enemy to prevent an attack by that enemy at a later time.”

END QUOTE.

# Value: Ethical behavior

The value, or weighing mechanism, in today’s round, is ethical behavior, or simply, doing the right things for the right reasons and upholding commonly recognized standards of conduct. I will ask you to evaluate this round based on the criterion of whether preventive warfare can be conducted ethically. If it cannot be conducted ethically, then the resolution should be denied. Now let’s narrow it down further with my…

## Criterion: Just War Doctrine

The way we will weigh the ethics of preventive warfare is through Just War Doctrine. Just War doctrine has bright-line requirements, making it a clear standard for ethical evaluation

Prof. James T. Johnson 2005 (Professor of Religion, Rutgers University) “Just war” BRITANNICA <https://www.britannica.com/topic/just-war> (article written in 1998, revised in 2005)

Most scholars agree that, to be considered just, a war must meet several jus ad bellum requirements. The four most important conditions are: (1) the war must be declared openly by a proper [sovereign](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereign) authority (e.g., the governing authority of the political [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) in question); (2) the war must have a just cause (e.g., defense of the [common good](https://www.britannica.com/topic/common-good) or a response to grave injustice); (3) the warring state must have just intentions (i.e., it must wage the war for [justice](https://www.britannica.com/topic/justice-social-concept) rather than for self-interest); and (4) the aim of the war must be the establishment of a just peace. Since the end of [World War II](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II) it has become customary to add three other conditions: (1) there must be a reasonable chance of success; (2) force must be used as a last resort; and (3) the expected benefits of war must outweigh its anticipated costs.

**Reason to Prefer Just War Doctrine**

There are two reasons to prefer Just War Doctrine as the standard for this round. First, this is the only weighing mechanism that works for this resolution. All other modes of analysis ask us to predict the future or guess about hypothetical outcomes. No one can know with certainty in advance whether more lives will be saved if a preventive war is engaged than if it isn’t, and no one can know what the outcome would have been, after the war is over, if we hadn’t engaged in it. Thus all measurements of lives or outcomes are impossible to rely on.

Second, Just War Doctrine is a widely accepted standard. Jeff McMahan, professor of philosophy at Rutgers, explained in 2012 why we should use this as our standard of ethical evaluation of warfare when he said QUOTE:

Prof. Jeff McMahan 2012 (prof. of philosophy, Rutgers Univ.) 11 Nov 2012 NEW YORK TIMES “Rethinking the ‘Just War,’ Part 1” <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/rethinking-the-just-war-part-1/>

 ”The disagreements extend from the particular to the general, for in most areas of morality there are no commonly recognized principles to which people can appeal in trying to resolve their disputes. But there is at least one contentious moral issue for which there is a widely accepted moral theory, one that has been embraced for many centuries by both religious and secular thinkers, not just in the United States, but in many societies. The issue is war and the theory is just war theory. “Just war theory” refers both to a tradition of thought and to a doctrine that has emerged from that tradition.”

END QUOTE. Now, I’ll explain why this resolution should be denied with my two contentions.

# Contention One: Just War Doctrine Denies

First let’s start with the widespread consensus that Just War Theory, the only universally accepted criterion for judging the morality of war, denies the resolution. Dr. Roger E. Olson explains in 2017:

Dr. Roger E. Olson 2017 (PhD; Prof.of Christian Theology of Ethics at Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University) Can a Preemptive War Ever Be Justified? 12 Aug 2017 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2017/08/can-preemptive-war-ever-justified/>

“According to most scholars of just war theory it absolutely forbids preemptive war. That is, according to traditional just war theory, a nation-state (or other political entity with military reserves and power) is never, ever, under any circumstances morally or ethically justified in attacking another one with “first strike” force. One of the traditional rules of traditional just war theory is that for a war to be justified it must be defensive. The enemy must strike first.”

END QUOTE. And there are two reasons why it violates.

## Violation 1 – Inadequate Knowledge.

The “Just Cause” criterion of Just War is violated because the would-be preventer cannot judge with adequate certainty his potential opponent’s actions or intentions. Galen Turner explains in 2010:

Galen Turner 2010 (master’s degree candidate, Univ. of Kansas, Dept. of Religious Studies) The History and Application of Christian Just War Theory as Related to Preemptive Attack

“Aquinas, like most Just War theologians, would condemn any attack that was purely preemptive. He held that determining if the actions or threat of the opponent were extreme enough to warrant military action is highly subjective, as maintained in all Just War thought.”

**END QUOTE. He goes on later in the same context to finish by saying QUOTE:**

“On a less theologically complex level, however, a truly preemptive attack would fail the just cause criteria, as there was nothing to react to.”

END QUOTE. Examples of this are numerous, but the classic is the US war on Iraq, where we had to supposedly pre-empt their weapons of mass destruction, only to find out that they didn’t exist after many thousands of lives were lost in a needless war.

## Violation 2 – Last Resort.

Just War Doctrine requires war to be used only as a “Last Resort,” a requirement preventive war by definition can never meet. On its face, this argument is self-evident, since we’re talking about a situation where no shots have been fired yet. The would-be preventer cannot say he has gone to the Last Resort because we don’t know yet what additional non-war options might be tried if we only keep trying.

The best example of this is one commonly cited in defense of pre-emptive or preventive war: the 6-day Arab-Israeli war started in 1967 when Israel attacked Egypt. A war in which everyone advertised Israel as the imminent victim who had to strike first was actually a classic example of how Last Resort was violated. Galen Turner explains in 2010:

Galen Turner 2010 (master’s degree candidate, Univ. of Kansas, Dept. of Religious Studies) The History and Application of Christian Just War Theory as Related to Preemptive Attack https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/6400/Turner\_ku\_0099M\_10941\_DATA\_1.pdf;sequence=1

“The Arabic posturing, military maneuvers, and fiery rhetoric were common occurrences. There was little that could be said to be threatening Israel to the point where a preemptive attack would be a proportional response. Furthermore, direct diplomatic efforts had been neglected by all parties, Israel had a history of systematically employing military tactics of attrition that provoked violent response, and the Israeli military, with help from the U.S., had assessed that it was the supreme military power in the region. In addition to this, there were those within the government pushing to annex land, specifically East Jerusalem. These considerations form a very different picture of Israeli intentions. Provoking attack fails the principles of just cause, right intention, and last resort.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

END QUOTE. Now let’s go to why this matters in…

# Contention Two: The Impact if we affirm

Affirming the resolution and justifying preemptive warfare will have bad long-term consequences. First, because dropping strict ethical standards of just war will impact international relations today and lead to more nations lowering their standards for starting war. Prof. Paul W. Schroeder explains in 2002:

Prof. Paul Schroeder 2002 ( historian and professor emeritus of history at the University of Illinois ) The Case Against Preemptive War 21 Oct 2002 <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-case-against-preemptive-war/>

“Norms, rules, standards of conduct, understandings about what is and is not permissible still count in international relations, now more than ever. They govern the expectations and calculations of statesmen; they influence public opinion and play a major role in the struggle for hearts and minds, increasingly important in this age of rising democracy, mass participation in politics, and instantaneous global communication. They form a central component of essential values in international politics – those universal values we constantly claim to be defending against the enemies of humankind. These norms, rules, and standards are vital not because they are immutable, unchallengeable, and enduring, but precisely because they are not. They are changeable, fragile, gained only by great effort and through bitter lessons of history, and easily destroyed, set aside, or changed for the worse for the sake of momentary gain or individual interest. And the fate of these norms and standards depends above all on what great powers, especially superpowers and hegemons, do with them and to them. The actions of great powers above all shape norms, mold expectations, provoke reactions, invite imitation and emulation, uphold or destroy or change the prevailing rules.”

END QUOTE. So the fragile international environment explains why we have to set high standards. And what can go wrong if we don’t? Right now we have an unstable nuclear armed dictator who feels threatened. Dr. Roger Olson in 2017 explains the risk:

Dr. Roger E. Olson 2017 (PhD; Prof.of Christian Theology of Ethics at Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University) Can a Preemptive War Ever Be Justified? 12 Aug 2017 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2017/08/can-preemptive-war-ever-justified/>

“So, now we come to America’s present situation. According to news reports (I know how unreliable they can be!) one world nation state is claiming to have developed nuclear-tipped missiles capable of reaching the United States. And its leader has publicly gloated that it has attained this status and ability and might just use it—preemptively. By many accounts, this dictator is mentally and emotionally unstable; it is reported that he has executed everyone he even suspects of being disloyal to him including close relatives. Some knowledgeable people think he just might launch a preemptive nuclear strike against a neighboring country and the U.S.”

END QUOTE. If you believe preventive war is OK, think twice, because you are affirming it not only for our country but for Kim Jong Un and North Korea as well. Giving him the green light is wrong morally and it’s bad policy and we should deny this resolution.

Opposing This Case

Affirmatives should study Just War doctrine and find multiple scholars who argue that there are, admittedly uncommon, but certain situations where preventive war can be justified even under its strict standards.

As always, a few cases where prevention wasn’t justified or done properly doesn’t prove that it’s never justified if done right.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)