

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 60  
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 4

---

2007

# Two Hundred Years of Preemption

George H. Quester

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Quester, George H. (2007) "Two Hundred Years of Preemption," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 60 : No. 4 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol60/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

*Dr. Quester is a professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland. He has also taught at Cornell and Harvard universities, the University of California at Los Angeles, the National War College, and the U.S. Naval Academy. He earned his doctorate in political science at Harvard University. His many books include *Offense and Defense in the International System* (reissued 2003), *Before and After the Cold War: Using Past Forecasts to Predict the Future* (2002), *Nuclear Monopoly* (2000), *The Nuclear Challenge in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (1995), *Nuclear Pakistan and Nuclear India: Stable Deterrent or Proliferation Challenge?* (1992), *Deterrence before Hiroshima* (1986), and *Nuclear Diplomacy: The First Twenty-five Years* (1970).*

© 2007 by George H. Quester  
*Naval War College Review, Autumn 2007, Vol. 60, No. 4*

## TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF PREEMPTION

---

George H. Quester

**T**he world could this year be celebrating the two-hundredth anniversary of what came to be known as “Copenhagening.” In August 1807, a British fleet for the *second* time confronted the Danish government at Copenhagen with an ultimatum that the possibility of the Danish fleet falling under the control of Napoleon could not be tolerated. Just as before the 1801 attack under the command of Admiral Horatio Nelson, the Danes were given the choice of surrendering their fleet to British control or of doing battle. The Danes resisted in 1807 as in 1801, with the result that the bulk of their fleet was destroyed (along with perhaps 30 percent of the city of Copenhagen itself), but the important result for Britain was that Napoleon was once more precluded from mustering a naval threat.<sup>1</sup>

The British rocket-firing and mortar ships that were used in the attack on Copenhagen were to see action again in the 1814 British attack on Baltimore during the War of 1812, in “the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air.” (One wonders whether anyone between 2007 and 2014 will now be exploring a special “sister city” celebration between Copenhagen and Baltimore.)

The threat headed off by British preemption is all too analogous, of course, to the threat posed since September 2001 by the possibility of mass-destruction terrorism against the U.S. homeland. Since such terrorists cannot be deterred by the prospect of retaliation, and since defenses against such attacks will always be imperfect, the lives of millions of Americans will be at stake. Whatever the wisdom or folly of the particular American “preemptive” attack on Iraq, future American presidents will have to be willing to consider striking first to preempt an attack on American cities.

The Bush administration has been criticized for blurring the distinction between “preemption” and preventive war. There are many ways to draw this distinction, but our intuition may often fall back upon the question of whether war is imminent and inevitable (whereupon we might be less morally critical of the initiative taken and label it “preemption”) or whether peace might instead have been an option for longer (with a morally condemnable “preventive war” initiated simply because the power relationships were being changed). In defense of any leader making such choices, however, it must be noted that “worst-case analysis” may often make an adversary’s attack seem inevitable, once the conditions for such an attack are right, so that actions to head off the attack will always seem like “preemption.”

As our model from the past, the threat the Royal Navy preempted at Copenhagen was existential, a threat to the very safety of Britain itself. If Napoleon or anyone else had ever been able to assemble naval superiority in the English Channel, the independence and liberties of Englishmen would have been at an end. The memories of the two preemptive attacks on Denmark were to be en-

---

*“Preemption” and “anticipatory self-defense” came to draw moral disapproval as a result of World War I.*

---

shrined for a century thereafter in periodic references, in Britain and among Britain’s prospective adversaries, to the option of another “Copenhagening” attack, striking first against any challenger to

British naval supremacy. Such threats were fairly openly voiced in Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century, by First Sea Lord Sir John (“Jackie”) Fisher and many others, against imperial Germany, after the kaiser elected to build a fleet rivaling Britain’s.<sup>2</sup>

Before London’s attention shifted to Germany, the same prospects and threats were discussed almost as openly against France, always a threat and rival in British eyes.<sup>3</sup> Around the time of disputes with Washington about the British Guiana–Venezuela border and about Central America, such threats were also voiced vis-à-vis the United States (at a time when Britain had some forty battleships and the United States had three but was planning to build more).<sup>4</sup> One can indeed find earlier references in congressional debates on naval expansion, where opponents of such expansion voiced fear that it would merely lead to a British “Copenhagening” attack on the United States.<sup>5</sup>

If the British threat was intended to keep imperial Germany or later the United States from expanding their fleets, it did not succeed in the end. Yet the threat of such preemption or preventive war was never seen as an entirely idle threat by prospective adversary states. Nelson and his successors had, after all,

proved that Britain was willing to act first militarily where its very existence was threatened.

As a real illustration of the same kind of reasoning in one British confrontation with the United States we must note the British attack on the Niagara River in 1837 against the *Caroline*.<sup>6</sup> The attacked vessel was quite rightly suspected of being utilized to help the Canadian rebels against British authority in southern Ontario. Rather than waiting for another shipload of weapons to come across the river to aid the rebels, a British naval raiding party preemptively sailed over to the American side, seized the ship, in the process killing a number of people, and then sent the burning vessel crashing over Niagara Falls.

The American protests over this mini-repetition of the Copenhagen experience included an 1841 note from Secretary of State Daniel Webster that has become remembered as the “*Caroline* doctrine.” Perhaps the most significant U.S. citation in today’s international law, the doctrine seeks to place stringent limits on what any power can inflict as a preemptive act, stressing that the attack being preempted must be *very* imminent and that the preemptive action has to be proportional to the attack being headed off.<sup>7</sup> It is more than a little ironic that this doctrine, the major American contribution to international law, is now regularly being challenged and minimized by American legal scholars associated with the Bush administration.<sup>8</sup>

If one wants another illustration of the logic of “Copenhagening,” one can move forward to the decisions made by Winston Churchill in 1940 immediately after the Germans had reached Paris and won a French surrender. Churchill, of course, knew what “Copenhagening” meant, having been a close associate of Jackie Fisher in the years of the German-British naval race before World War I. Rather than live with the risk that the French fleet might fall under Hitler’s control, Churchill dispatched British ships to several French ports in North Africa with an ultimatum very similar to what had been given to the Danes, except that the French were given *three* choices, rather than merely two. They could put their naval vessels under British control; or they could sail their ships across the Atlantic and station them in Martinique and Guadeloupe, in effect under American surveillance; or they could do battle with the British. The French chose to do battle, with the result that several French warships were sunk and some 1,300 French naval personnel lost their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Churchill chose not to label this engagement with the French with the phrase “Copenhagening,” for this might hardly have endeared him to the Danes, who had just been subjected to the Nazi occupation, or to the Americans, or to the few other neutrals left in the world. Most Americans were indeed relieved by the British attack, as a sign that Britain under Churchill was not prepared to come to terms with Hitler’s Nazi Germany but would fight on.

But the imminence of preemptive motives as World War II evolved is hardly limited to the British naval tradition. One important theme of this article will be that preemption may indeed have been somewhat legitimized by all the experiences of 1939 to 1941 in other places, as the unfolding of the new war substantially eroded the worldview that liberals around the world had endorsed in 1918.

The dominant theme of world opinion in 1918, as embodied in Woodrow Wilson's designs for the League of Nations, was that "anticipatory self-defense" was a major part of the problem for international relations, causing wars to occur that perhaps neither side had wanted. The rule for the new League of Nations was to be that of "collective security," by which whoever was the *first* to take military action would ipso facto be at fault thereby, with all the world coming in to punish the launcher of violence.<sup>10</sup>

But an important theme of the later United Nations, as envisaged by the more "realist" Franklin Roosevelt in 1945, was that some kinds of advance threats are so ominous that one cannot wait for an actual military attack, that one may instead have to anticipate and preempt such a threat.<sup>11</sup> The chain of relevant examples here is interestingly interlocked. Facing the threat that Adolf Hitler might

---

*Whatever the wisdom or folly of the particular American "preemptive" attack on Iraq, future American presidents will have to be willing to consider striking first.*

---

have meant to invade the Soviet Union, as he had outlined in *Mein Kampf*, Joseph Stalin confronted his weaker neighbors in the Baltic region and demanded that they submit to a sort of Soviet military

occupation. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia submitted reluctantly, but the Finns did not. In his dialogues with the Finns before launching an invasion against them in the winter of 1939, Stalin's message was a very straightforward exercise in what we today would call "realism." He simply accused Finland of being too small and too weak, so small and weak that it amounted ipso facto to a threat to Soviet security, if only because it was a power vacuum through which bigger and more hostile powers could strike at Leningrad and the rest of the USSR.<sup>12</sup>

Because Finland had been a democratically governed and civilized society between the wars, Americans and many other people saw this attack as nothing more than another barbaric and aggressive dictator having his way with a democratic neighbor, exactly as Hitler had treated Czechoslovakia. At the behest of many of the Latin American members of the League of Nations, after the military invasion of Finland was launched the League actually expelled the USSR from membership.<sup>13</sup> Many ordinary people in France and Britain had the same moral view of the Russo-Finnish conflict, but Winston Churchill and a number of the French leaders saw additional strategic advantages to offering some "assistance" to the Finns. Because the logical line of communication for any British

and French forces coming to help the Finns would run across northern Norway and Sweden, Churchill saw an opportunity to use the plight of the Finns as an excuse to cut off Nazi Germany from Swedish iron ore. Further, because Finland was the victim of what Stalin was styling a preemptive attack, the Allies might have a way to weaken Nazi Germany economically.<sup>14</sup>

When asked to give the Allies permission to cross their territory, however, Sweden and Norway, however sympathetic they themselves were to Finland, refused, knowing that Germany would almost surely invade southern Scandinavia if such permission were given. Nonetheless, the Allied proposal to “help” the Finns, much as it was really directed against Nazi Germany’s iron ore sources, may indeed have helped bring an end to the Winter War between Finland and the USSR: Stalin, fearing the consequences of being drawn into actual military combat with even token British and French contingents, somewhat reduced the demands he was making of the Finns. The Finnish government, seeing what the Allies were up to and not wanting its Scandinavian friends drawn needlessly into World War II, softened its attitude on a truce with the Soviets.

But the suspension of warfare between Finland and the USSR in March 1940 did not end the plans of Churchill and his French partners to strike a strategic blow against Hitler. The troops that had been assembled to land at Narvik and then to move across northern Norway and Sweden were kept ready for action, as Churchill also contemplated mining the Norwegian coastal waters through which Swedish iron ore was shipped from Narvik to Germany. The Nazi German leadership was hardly unaware of the Allied intention, and Hitler gave orders for the planning of a preemptive counteroperation. The British mined Norwegian waters on 8 April 1940, and German armed forces moved into Norway and Denmark on the 9th.

To summarize the chain of preemptive logic here, the British and French were thus *not* preempting Nazi aggression in Scandinavia in 1940. But they were using the Soviet self-described preemptive attack on Finland to plan an invasion of Norway and Sweden. The German attack on Denmark and Norway preempted this Allied military violation of Norway and Sweden. In the interactions of preemptive motives here, Sweden came out ahead, being allowed to remain neutral, while Denmark was a loser.

Following the German occupation of Denmark, the British government elected to act preemptively against the possibility of a similar German move into Iceland, which had been very loosely affiliated with Denmark under the personal rule of the Danish monarch. Just as Sweden and Norway had objected to British military occupation, and as Norway and Denmark had objected to the German military moves, Iceland protested the British action. When the British government explained that it had been taken only to head off a German attack,

the Icelandic government rejected this argument, accepting the occupation only under protest and with the British promise that the occupation would be terminated as soon as the war with Germany was over.<sup>15</sup> When President Roosevelt elected to join the British occupation of Iceland in 1941, the American government asked for an Icelandic invitation, or at least an Icelandic statement that there was no objection to the American presence. The government in Reykjavik offered neither, and the United States settled in the end for a statement that the Icelanders would not violently object, again with a promise that the American forces would leave when the war with Germany was over.

The end of this trail comes with the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945, but the shadow of preemptive logic does not stop there, for it continued for Finland to the end of the Cold War. Finland was spared an imposition of communism and an influx of Slavic immigrants, but was forced to sign a Friendship Treaty providing that the Soviet Union could demand “urgent consultations” with the Finnish government whenever Moscow sensed a risk of a new German invasion coming through Finnish soil.<sup>16</sup> It can, indeed, be argued that the United States and Britain by 1945 sensed a certain legitimacy in Soviet concern for warding off future invasions through the smaller states to the west. The understanding and hope of Roosevelt and his advisers, before the Yalta Conference of February 1945 and after, was that the Soviets would be given a preemptive guarantee against new invasions through Finland and Poland, while these countries would otherwise be allowed to manage their own affairs. This was indeed what was more or less achieved for Finland, but it was violated for all the other states that were forced to live under communist rule.

As the symmetrical opposite of Finland, Iceland in the summer of 1945 naturally enough inquired whether American troops would be leaving, now that the war in Europe was over.<sup>17</sup> The American response was that the war was not “over” until there was a German peace treaty. The logic of 1939 to 1945 was now that serious military threats had to be headed off in advance, a very different logic from the inherent sanctity of small countries proposed by the League of Nations, and this logic burdened Iceland just as it had burdened Finland. The subsequent history of Icelandic-U.S. relations all through the Cold War shows repeated demands for the termination of the American bases in Iceland, amid calls for Icelandic withdrawal from NATO, fortuitously headed off again and again by the timing of Soviet military actions in Korea, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc.<sup>18</sup>

To repeat, the League of Nations had regarded preemptive thinking as a major part of the problem of preserving the peace. The United Nations was to be based somewhat more on a premise that systems like fascism were inherent threats to peace, threats that had to be anticipated and preempted. One could see this view as simply an acceptance of hard-headed “realist” thinking by Roosevelt and



everyone else, having seen how rapidly the Nazis had moved from seeming disarmament to control of all Western and Central Europe. Much of the diminished support for collective security and of the renewed legitimacy for anticipatory self-defense must thus be directed to the experience with Hitler and his allies. The difference in basic reasoning between the two international organizations is illustrated by some of the subtle differences between the League of Nations Covenant and the United Nations Charter. In articles 53 and 107, the Charter specifically allows any of the World War II Allies to resume warfare, without Security Council permission, against any of the enemy states of that war. Also, the Security Council is charged with dealing with “threats to peace,” where the League of Nations requirement was simply that an attack on one was an attack on all.

We now often remember condemnations of preventive war and preemption as grounded in the United Nations Charter, that is, as a post-1945 phenomenon. The 1981 Israeli attack on the Osirak reactor in Iraq was thus condemned by a United Nations vote, with even the United States joining in the criticism. If preventive wars were contemplated to head off the Soviet or Chinese nuclear programs, such wars apparently never got very serious consideration.<sup>19</sup> One thrust of this article is that memory may distort the historical record here, as the United Nations at its founding was less resolutely opposed to preemptive reasoning than had been the League of Nations.

Because mass-destruction attacks on the American homeland may now become all too possible, attacks that cannot easily be stopped with defenses, attacks that cannot be so readily deterred as in the confrontations of the Cold War, it may remain necessary for American presidents to claim the prerogative of preemption (even if the wisdom of the particular preemptive attack against Iraq is in doubt). Just as the world could not tolerate a reappearance of fascism and the British could not tolerate the threat of a naval invasion, so the world today may not be able to tolerate the threat of terrorism with weapons of mass destruction. The basic argument of this article is that there has indeed been an extensive history of preemptive and anticipatory military action, a history from which lessons can be drawn, if the United States will now inevitably have to claim this prerogative. Preemption is often described as condemned by international law, but this condemnation was not so clear or strong until World War I showed the world how horrible war could be. Later, if such a condemnation was clear in the aftermath of World War I, the memories of World War II served somewhat to reduce it.

What, then, are some of the lessons of the historical experience? One kind of lesson is to be extracted from the way the world saw Stalin’s actions after World War II. Rather than merely ensuring the USSR against aggression, as Yalta

conferees were ready to do, Stalin chose, for reasons of ideology or of more severe preemptive concerns, to deny Poland and Romania, etc., what he tolerated in Finland. Had he allowed Estonia to be independent, albeit hosting Soviet military bases, and had he allowed Poland a democratic government, albeit with Soviet military bases and transit rights to East Germany, much of the Cold War would have been different, and much of Western hostility to the Soviet system could have been avoided.

What Finland achieved in maintaining its own political and cultural character, even while being “Finlandized,” is what Iceland also achieved in the West—to escape being culturally swamped. The American threat here was more a matter of demographics than of ideological zeal; one constantly had to compare the size of British or American forces that might be needed to prevent a German or Soviet invasion with the military-age male cohort of the Icelandic population. At times during World War II the total of British and American servicemen in Iceland vastly exceeded the total Icelanders of similar age, implying a risk that a great many young Icelandic women would pair off with foreigners rather than

---

*The threat the Royal Navy preempted at Copenhagen was existential, a threat to the very safety of Britain itself.*

---

with Icelanders. One of the demands most repeated by opponents of the American presence after 1945 was that the garrison at Keflavík be restricted to the base or given only a limited number of

passes per month into Reykjavík or any other Icelandic town. A parallel demand was that American military personnel deployed to Iceland all be of European origin. (This demand was indeed accepted well into the 1950s, it being analogous to the Saudi Arabian demand that no Jewish personnel be deployed at the American air base in Dhahran.)

On a broader cultural front, the Icelandic demand was that American television signals not be transmitted at Keflavík in a manner that would seduce Icelanders into watching American programming—this at a time when Iceland was considering having no television at all, or at most a very limited state-run offering devoted mostly to culture.<sup>20</sup> The end solution for this problem saw American armed forces television shifted to an on-base cable system, with programs no longer transmitted over the air, where Icelanders would have been able to tune them in. A solution for the demographic problem came when the U.S. Air Force deployed more American *female* personnel to Keflavík, making the percentage of females assigned to that base the highest in the world. After a great deal of arguing back and forth, in the end the American presence was contained, so that Icelandic cultural autonomy could survive, but a crucial military base remained

under American control (so that, most importantly, it could not quickly fall under Soviet control).

Some would see the difference between Eastern Europe's fate and the fate of Iceland as illustrating the difference between democracies and totalitarian dictatorships in their foreign policies. Lest one conclude that democracies will always be restrained in how much they change a territory after feeling driven to take preemptive military possession of it, one must note two earlier preemptive moves by the United States: the occupation of the Philippines and the incorporation of Hawaii, both in 1898.<sup>21</sup> In both cases, an important incentive for the U.S. government was the fear that some other power would seize these positions in the Pacific if the United States did not. In the case of the Philippines, such fears pertained in particular to Japan and to imperial Germany. (Germany, in the wake of the Spanish defeat in the Spanish-American War, had in fact purchased the Mariana and Caroline islands from Spain, as well as showing an interest in the Philippines.) In the case of Hawaii, the powers being preempted were Britain, Japan, and imperial Russia, all of which had dispatched naval vessels to Hawaiian waters at one point or another.

Filipino resistance to the American occupation of the islands produced a very savage guerrilla war, one that some have compared to the war in Iraq. It had, however, the happy outcome that the guerrilla resistance was in the end suppressed, and Filipinos over the ensuing four decades came to feel generally positive about Americans.<sup>22</sup> An early American commitment to Filipino independence was helpful here, as was quite enlightened management of the territory once peace was established. In 1898 and afterward, very few Americans saw the Philippines as slated for statehood and full incorporation into the United States. The island population was simply too large, and seemingly too alien in culture and traditions, to be assimilated, and the islands were too far away geographically.

In contrast, one saw no violent resistance to the American incorporation of Hawaii, and today Hawaii is seen by one and all as just one more state of the United States, not only a key naval base that had to be kept out of hostile hands. But it is important to note that in the first territorial legislature elected after 1898 a majority of the seats went to a party that was opposed to American sovereignty. If no such sentiment could ever capture a majority in Hawaii today, an important reason is that the ethnic nature of Hawaii was changed forever by massive inflows of Caucasian, Japanese, and other immigrants, to the point where the native Hawaiian population today represents only some 20 percent of the total.<sup>23</sup>

To summarize the comparisons rather bluntly, Hawaii thus suffered the fate that Stalin tried to impose on Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Because the ethnic

and social change in Hawaii was relatively complete and successful, only a few people would today voice any objection. Because the Slavic migration into the Baltic republics was not completed before the USSR collapsed, the resistance to such a process became a cause célèbre for the Baltic peoples and one more grievance to be noted around the world against Stalin and the Soviet system. Finland escaped what Estonia experienced. Finland's fate was more comparable to that of Iceland, which in turn escaped what had happened to Hawaii. One general lesson for practitioners of preemption (for these are *all* examples of such preemption) would be that one must thus either succeed totally at the assimilation of the territory involved or else be quite scrupulous about respecting the local political and social status quo.

A second lesson stems more broadly from the *uses* to which one's hegemonic power and exercises in preemption are put. The example of Britain in the century before 1914 is quite suggestive. The British were often imperious, arrogant, and high-handed, and Americans of all stripes retained resentments on this score into the twentieth century. One can find such resentment, and fear of the possibility of a British preemptive naval attack, expressed by people as prominent as Alfred Thayer Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge.<sup>24</sup>

Yet each of these three prominent thinkers on American naval strategy and foreign policy was to revert to a view by which Britain was seen not as a rival or enemy but as a role model and partner. An important explanation for this shift stems from the relatively benign purposes for which Britain had used its naval power. The British dominance of the seas (for the preservation of which the British were so ready to strike the first blow) was used to stamp out piracy and the slave trade and generally to make the seas safe for the free trade of all—purposes, indeed, altogether parallel to those for which the U.S. Navy is deployed today. If power is compounded and retained but used for the political and economic benefit of all, the counterinstincts of balance-of-power thinking are not likely to be so persuasive, and the logic of “bandwagoning” will play a larger role.

Not every American naval planner came around to the same benign interpretation of British naval strength that Mahan and Roosevelt endorsed at the end. One sees a curious debate during and after World War I between Admiral William S. Sims, who had served as head of liaison with the British during the war and now pooh-poohed any possibility of future Anglo-American conflict, and Admiral William S. Benson, the first officer to hold the title of Chief of Naval Operations. Benson wrote repeated memoranda to President Woodrow Wilson arguing that every state that had ever begun matching Britain on the seas—the Netherlands, Spain, France, and Germany—had wound up fighting a war with the British and that the United States was next on the list.<sup>25</sup>

The combined lesson of Pax Britannica and the tradition of “Copenhagening” is thus that some Americans, such as Admiral Benson, deeply resented Britain, while others felt gratitude for and acceptance of how British power had been used. The same may be inevitable for any parallel American policy of preemption in the future. The instincts of balance-of-power thinking are simply too strong to be swept away entirely by gratitude and bandwagoning, but if the power exercising a hegemony can show that it is solicitous toward the rest of the system, some of such instincts can be overcome.

A third set of lessons obviously pertains to the possible setting of precedents for other powers, who might imitate one’s initiations of armed conflict. In the aftermath of the American incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq, one now often sees concern as to whether they would embolden Israel or India for preemptive strikes against Iran or Pakistan, or Japan against North Korea, etc.<sup>26</sup>

One can find an interesting analogy here in the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, when the Japanese attacked the Russian fleet at Port Arthur without giving the warning of a prior declaration of war (a pattern that was to be repeated, of course, in 1941 at Pearl Harbor). Americans and most of the European powers were relatively sympathetic to the Japanese, regarding Japan as the model of how an Asian state could quickly become modernized and westernized and seeing Russia as the most backward of the European states. If Japan was being welcomed into “the club” of Western and modern states, however, most Europeans nonetheless regarded the manner of the sneak attack on Port Arthur as a bit improper and unseemly. The new member of the club obviously needed to read and study the rules a bit more.

This reaction may thus have been common around the European continent and in the United States, but it hardly was the response of Sir John Fisher. Rather than apologizing for or lamenting the style of the Japanese attack, Fisher told his officers that this was exactly the way preemption should be done, striking early and first, striking without warning.<sup>27</sup> (There had, after all, been no prior declarations of war when the Danish fleets were “Copenhagened.”) These were the years of the beginning of a British-Japanese formal alliance. Since Japanese naval officers very much admired and wanted to emulate the British navy in these years, many of them studying the naval craft in Britain or on British ships, it is indeed inevitable that the Japanese had heard the British public statements about “Copenhagening” and fully knew to what the phrase referred. In the same way that Japan learned from the British and sensed that striking first is morally legitimate when one’s existence is threatened, might Japan or another friend of the United States now learn a parallel lesson from more recent ventures into “preemption”?

One argument advanced here is that “preemption” and “anticipatory self-defense” came to draw moral disapproval as a result of World War I. That war shocked one and all as an exemplar of how horrible war could now be. That war was very plausibly the result of interlocking anticipations, when adversaries saw urgent necessity to strike first. The impact of World War I is interestingly illustrated by the changes in Theodore Roosevelt’s attitudes as the war broke out. Roosevelt’s first reaction, in letters and some public comments, was to sympathize with the German need to strike through Belgium, since the French might have done the same thing in reverse.<sup>28</sup> Belgium (perhaps like Finland one world war later) was just too small and weak to defend itself—that is, was too weak to avoid becoming a power vacuum and a sort of international nuisance. Great powers like Germany and France would simply have to do what they needed to do, and small powers would suffer because of all the inevitabilities.

After weeks of reports, however, about how ordinary Belgians were suffering in the war they had not started, Theodore Roosevelt shifted dramatically away from such tough-minded realism to condemning the Germans for having imposed war on an innocent neutral. Roosevelt was not to be noted for his logical consistency, and he never came to any total endorsement of collective security or of Woodrow Wilson’s vision by which *all* initiation of war was to be condemned, but neither could he, in face of the horror of a prolonged World War I, stick to a much more tolerant view of power politics above all.

Roosevelt in his private letters had earlier even suggested that he would have sympathized with the British had they chosen to launch a preventive “Copenhagening” attack on the growing German navy, or with the kaiser had Germany launched a preventive war attack on land against the Russians.<sup>29</sup> Very few statesmen would have voiced such sympathies in the immediate aftermath of the carnage of World War I. But the evolution of World War II was to bring back a lot of more “realistic” thinking of such kinds.

Preemption and preventive war thus indeed have a mixed history in terms of moral acceptance. The strongest condemnation of such war initiation dates from 1918 and not from 1945. The world’s experiences before 1914 and after 1938 may yet offer lessons on how we all will have to live with and make the best of such options.

---

#### NOTES

This article presents some preliminary conclusions in what will be a book-length study of historical analogies to the contemporary issues of preemption and preventive war, the research for

which is supported by a grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation. The foundation bears no responsibility for the propositions presented here, which are solely those of the author.

1. An account of these attacks on Copenhagen can be found in R. C. Anderson, *Naval War in the Baltic* (London: Francis Edwards, 1969).
2. A good discussion of the interactions here can be found in Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
3. On Fisher's plans against France, see Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1973), pp. 214, 217.
4. For discussions of the possibility of British preemptive attacks against the U.S. Navy in this period, see Forrest Davis, *The Atlantic System* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941), pp. 3, 44–46.
5. Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People's Navy* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 70–71, 93.
6. For details of the attack on the *Caroline*, see Kenneth P. Stevens, *Border Diplomacy* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1989), pp. 13–15.
7. On the details of Webster's note, *ibid.*, pp. 165–66.
8. For an example, see Abram D. Sofaer, "On the Necessity of Preemption," *European Journal of International Law* 14, no. 2 (2003), pp. 209–26.
9. Churchill's reasons for the British attack on the French fleet are discussed in Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), chap. 8.
10. A fuller discussion of collective security can be found in Inis L. Claude, *Swords into Plowshares* (New York: Random House, 1966), esp. chap. 12.
11. FDR's vision of what the United Nations approach to peace would look like is outlined in Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *FDR and the Creation of the United Nations* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1997).
12. The dialogue between Stalin and the Finns is recounted in Olli Vehvilainen, *Finland in the Second World War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), chap. 3.
13. On the Soviet expulsion from the League, see R. H. Haigh et al., eds., *Soviet Foreign Policy: The League of Nations and Europe* (Aldershot, U.K.: Gower, 1986).
14. Churchill's intentions here are discussed in Martti Haikio, "The Race for Northern Europe, September, 1939–June, 1940," in *Scandinavia during the Second World War*, ed. Henrik S. Nissen (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 53–98.
15. Iceland's experience with being the object of preemption is outlined in Donald Neuchterlein, *Iceland, Reluctant Ally* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), chaps. 1, 2.
16. On the Finnish experience during and after World War II, see T. Michael Reddy, ed., *Charting an Independent Course* (Claremont, Calif.: Regina Books, 1998).
17. On Icelandic feelings after 1945, see Neuchterlein, *Iceland, Reluctant Ally*, chaps. 3–10.
18. See Gudni Th. Jóhannesson, "To the Edge of Nowhere? U.S.-Icelandic Defense Relations during and after the Cold War," *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 3/4 (Summer/Autumn 2004), pp. 115–37.
19. This author's more extended views on the American failure to launch a preventive war precluding a Soviet nuclear force can be found in George H. Quester, *Nuclear Monopoly* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 2000).
20. For this author's fuller account of the issues on American television signals in Iceland, see George H. Quester, *The International Politics of Television* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1990), pp. 182–84.
21. The preemptive aspects of American imperialism in 1898 are outlined in Warren Zimmerman, *First Great Triumph* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), pp. 318–19.
22. The American subjugation of the Philippines is chronicled in John Morgan Gates, *Schoolbooks and Krags* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973).
23. See Tom Coffman, *The Island Edge of America* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 2003), on the assimilation of Hawaii.
24. The evolution of the thinking about Britain in these major figures is outlined in George T. Davis, *A Navy Second to None* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1940), and Philips Payson O'Brien, *British and American Naval Power* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998).
25. On Admiral Benson, see Mary Klachko with David Trail, *Admiral William Shephard Benson:*

- First Chief of Naval Operations* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987), esp. chap. 12.
26. For such a contemporary statement of concern, see Karl P. Mueller et al., *Striking First* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2006), pp. 115–19, and Michael O’Hanlon, Susan Rice, and James Steinberg, *The New National Security Strategy and Preemption*, Policy Brief 113 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, December 2002).
27. Fisher’s statements about the Japanese Port Arthur attack are recounted in Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone*, pp. 319–20.
28. Theodore Roosevelt’s reactions to the outbreak of World War I are outlined in John Milton Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 277–78.
29. For these earlier endorsements of preemption or preventive war by Theodore Roosevelt, see Alfred Vagts, *Defense and Diplomacy* (New York: Kings Crown, 1956), p. 293.

