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The Bush Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary

Is President Bush's war on terrorism based on the "Roosevelt Corollary," and did Roosevelt's corollary try to justify unilateral military action and pre-emptive wars?*

Option of Last Resort:

Unilateral and Pre-Emptive Military Action

The war on terrorism is being fought on the basis of the Bush Doctrine. The Bush Doctrine, like the Roosevelt Corollary that preceded it, seeks to justify a president's unilateral decision to use military force when U.S. citizens and interests are threatened. The unilateral decision to use force can go hand-in-hand with pre-emptive action if the president believes that enemy regimes have the will and the means to strike at the U.S., and are not likely to be stopped. Despite what you may have heard in the media, President George W. Bush is hardly the first commander in chief to justify intervention in foreign countries or pre-emptive military strikes against enemies. Historically, numerous U.S. presidents -- Democratic and Republican -- have sought a rationale for using military force pre-emptively and unilaterally.



AN AMERICAN TRADITION

The Bush Doctrine, like the Roosevelt Corollary, continues policies that evolved during the early years of the republic. *To dominate the continent*, our early presidents used military force unilaterally and sometimes pre-emptively against so-called Indian nations. (George Washington's campaigns in the Ohio River Valley illustrate.) *To dominate the hemisphere*, presidents used force against Latin American nations on the basis of the Monroe Doctrine. (Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick policy was its strongest expression.) *To dominate the globe*, presidents have projected force on the basis of the Truman Doctrine, Bush Doctrine, and numerous doctrines in between. These twentieth-century doctrines relied on the historic building blocks of the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary to it.

The roots of unilateralism, of going it alone, reach back to the origins of our nation. They can already be seen in President George Washington's appeal to the American people in his Farewell Address (1796) to remain aloof from the concerns of the world when our vital interests are not at stake, and especially to avoid entangling alliances with European nations. Washington had backed his words with deeds: the 1793 Proclamation of Neutrality had angered France's allies in the U.S., since we were in effect renegeing on our commitment to our nation's first ally.

Likewise, the roots of pre-emption can be seen in Jefferson's about-face regarding a navy. He was not initially for a navy and marine corps, but the arrogance and depredations of the Barbary pirates made him strike the Muslims decisively so that they could never menace our commerce again. Christopher Hitchens writes of

Jefferson's determined use of naval and military force to reduce the Barbary States of the Ottoman Empire, which had set up a slave-taking system of piracy and blackmail along the western coast of North Africa. Our third president was not in a position to enforce regime change in Algiers or Tripoli, but he was able to insist on regime behavior-modification (and thus to put an end to at least one slave system). Ever since then, every major system of tyranny in the world has had to run at least the risk of a confrontation with the United States, and one hopes that the Jeffersonians among us will continue to ensure that this remains true. [Christopher Hitchens, "The Export of Democracy: Jefferson's Ideas Presaged the Bush Doctrine," Wall Street Journal, July 12, 2005: p. A16]

The Monroe Doctrine is the classic American expression of unilateralism; it implied pre-emption. The doctrine was developed in the wake of the War of 1812, when the British sacked Washington, D.C. Partly in response to this humiliation, President James Monroe's secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, developed a foreign policy that sought to discourage European involvement in the Western hemisphere. He left open the possibility of unilateral action and pre-emptive military strikes in a well-defined sphere of influence. Thus Monroe's 1823 annual message to Congress asserted: "The American continents ... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonizations by any European powers."

The Monroe Doctrine was debated by presidents at critical points in U.S. history. Following Abraham Lincoln's Inauguration, Secretary of State William Seward wrote a letter to the commander in chief headed, "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration." Geoffrey Perret records that Seward "wanted Lincoln to unite the country by waging war -- or at least threatening war -- against France and Spain. The Spanish had recently seized Santo Domingo and, with French connivance, were poised to grab Haiti. This violation of the Monroe Doctrine could not be allowed to stand. Tell them to get out of our hemisphere, or else, he urged."^[1]

ROOSEVELT COROLLARY TO THE MONROE DOCTRINE

The United States took the Monroe Doctrine to the next level in 1898 and the half-dozen years that followed. First, the U.S. was quick to pick a fight with Spain in 1898, winning the war handily and evicting the Spanish from Cuba and other possessions. Then in 1901 Congress passed the Platt Amendment, which required the Cubans to write a Constitution to our liking and authorized the U.S. commander in chief to intervene in Cuban affairs if he thought it necessary to protect American lives and interests.

Then in 1904 Theodore Roosevelt stretched the Monroe Doctrine even further. The U.S. declared its right to be the policeman of the Western hemisphere. Here was one justification. The government of the Dominican Republic was bankrupt, and the president was concerned that European powers might intervene to collect the payments owed them. To keep European forces out of the Western hemisphere, TR formulated the corollary in his 1904 annual message to Congress: "Chronic wrongdoing ... may ... ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power."

The term "international police power" has a decidedly modern ring. The Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary to it created the framework for U.S. foreign policy in the Western hemisphere for decades. They provided the rationale for the U.S. military to intervene in Latin America when a president thought it in the national interest to do so.

For almost three decades, presidents used the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine to justify intervention in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Haiti. Historian Samuel Eliot Morrison observed: "So burdensome did this responsibility become, so offensive to Latin America, and so utterly futile (since the evacuation by American armed forces was inevitably followed by a dictatorship or a revolution) that in 1930 the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine was officially repudiated by the department of state."

It was TR's distant cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who scotched the idea of intervention and pre-emptive military strikes in Latin America, pursuing instead a Good Neighbor Policy. As one commentator quipped, "A Roosevelt gave and a Roosevelt hath taken away."

THE DOCTRINE OF DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS

Yet in truth, intervention and pre-emption have remained options for every modern U.S. president, and not restricted to the Western Hemisphere. Democratic presidents have asserted these options in several notable instances. In the months leading up to Pearl Harbor, FDR publicly warned Nazi Germany that the U.S. might strike at U-boats. ("If the rattlesnake is coiled to strike, you don't wait for it to strike but crush it underfoot.") Two decades later, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy seriously considered a preemptive strike against nuclear missile bases in Cuba. In December 1998, President Bill Clinton launched Operation Desert Fox against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, on the grounds that the Iraqi regime was violating U.N. resolutions, developing weapons of mass destruction, and harboring terrorists. Further, the 2004 Democratic platform makes room for pre-emptive military action, and in a debate with President Bush in October of 2004, Senator John Kerry defended the U.S.'s right to pre-emptive military action if the nation's vital interests were at stake.^[2]

Since World War II, Republican presidents have also asserted the options of unilateral intervention and preemption -- Eisenhower in Guatemala, Reagan in Grenada, and Bush in Panama.

Anybody who doubts that successive Republican and Democratic administrations have been willing to project force -- sometimes unilaterally, sometimes preemptively -- should consider this fact: since 1990, the U.S. has engaged in almost 150 military missions.^[3]

GEORGE W. BUSH

In keeping with the long-standing policy of unilateralism and pre-emption, President George W. Bush formulated his famous doctrine on September 11, 2001 -- the day of the worst terrorist attacks ever on U.S. soil. Bush declared that the U.S. would "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." Nine days later, in a landmark speech before a joint session of Congress, Bush reiterated: "We will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven for terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

Bush developed the doctrine in a White House paper, "National Security Strategy of the United States." The doctrine provided the rationale for launching the war against Afghanistan in October of 2001, and against Iraq in March of 2003.

Although the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine has long since been repudiated, the Bush Doctrine borrows elements from it, especially the premise that the United States has the unilateral right to use military force when our nation's interests are threatened. The Bush Doctrine makes pre-emption a policy of last resort -- which is seen as vital when considering just war theory -- but it boldly asserts the right to hunt down terrorists in foreign lands and to launch pre-emptive military strikes against the governments of nations that harbor terrorists.

There is currently much debate about the Bush Doctrine. Many believe that the doctrine of pre-emption is imprudent because it provides a rationale for the target of pre-emption to strike first -- ironically -- in its own self-defense. Regarding the morality of pre-emption, I will just say this, because there has been much misguided rhetoric on the subject the past three years. If the American intelligence community had discovered beforehand that al Qaeda planned to attack on 9/11 -- if there had been "actionable intelligence" -- is there any question that the U.S. would have had the right to strike pre-emptively, and to wage war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that supported it? Is there any doubt that our nation would have had the right to make the strikes unilaterally if time and/or diplomatic gamesmanship kept the U.S. from securing international approval?

(Question from Scott W. of Clinton, New Jersey)

* Full question: I was watching C-Span and heard a speaker say that President Bush's war on terrorism was based on the "Roosevelt Corollary." Is that true, and did Theodore Roosevelt's corollary try to justify unilateral military action and pre-emptive wars?

[1] Geoffrey Perret, *Lincoln's War: The Untold Story of America's Greatest President and Commander in Chief* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 23.

[2] Geoffrey Perret, *Lincoln's War: The Untold Story of America's Greatest President and Commander in Chief* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 23.

[3] Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004).