

Iraq War Lesson: ‘Preventative Wars’ Are Illegal Wars, Period.

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This week marks the 19th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and in the last two decades there has been no serious American reckoning with the magnitude of the crime that our government and its allies committed.

The invasion was an unprovoked war of aggression in flagrant violation of the U.N. Charter, and it led to decades of violence and instability whose effects continue to plague the region until today. The war was also one of the biggest strategic errors of modern U.S. history, but it is insufficient to acknowledge the war as a “mistake” and leave it at that. The U.S. still presents itself as a defender of international order, but in 2003 it broke the most important rule that prohibits the use of force except for self-defense.

For the last 20 years, the U.S. has treated the sovereignty of many states as conditional, reserving the right to attack others when it so chooses. If we should learn anything from U.S. wars in this century, it is that aggression against other states is always wrong and it erodes the protections under international law that help to maintain peace and security. No matter the pretext or rationalization, no state has the right to attack another. Supposedly good intentions are no justification.

The lesson of the Iraq war is not only that the U.S. should stay out of the regime change business, but also that the U.S. should renounce preventive warfare once and for all.

The 2003 invasion was responsible for inflicting and unleashing violence that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, injured countless more, and displaced millions. The instability created by the invasion also contributed to the emergence of the Islamic State and the conflict in Syria. The people of Iraq will be living with the war’s effects for decades

to come, and we need to remember that they are the ones who suffered and lost the most from the reckless decision of our government. While most Americans quickly forget about these policies, our government's destructive actions have lasting consequences for tens of millions of people. Those actions will be remembered generations from now.

Because our government wields so much power, it is essential that it learns to use force sparingly and only when absolutely necessary. This means that the U.S. must not threaten other states with attack to compel them to make concessions, and it must under no circumstances initiate hostilities against another state. The U.S. should not act as an international vigilante seeking to bludgeon so-called "rogue" states into submission. The most important thing the U.S. can do to uphold international order is to adhere to it in its own conduct. Routine U.S. violations of international law serve to undermine it and invite others to treat it with the same contempt.

Preventive war cannot be defensive, and it cannot be just. The Bush administration deceptively branded the attack on Iraq as "pre-emption," but there was no imminent threat to pre-empt. The Iraq war was sold to the public by stoking the irrational fear of some possible future threat that was never going to materialize. Even if the remote threat had been real, it still would not have justified the invasion.

This is directly relevant to the ongoing debate over the possible use of force against Iran's nuclear facilities. While the nuclear deal may soon be revived for the next few years, the danger that the U.S. might resort to military action to "solve" the problem will not be completely gone. There are still many American advocates for military action even now, and it is possible they could find a receptive audience in a future administration. If the nuclear deal collapses sooner rather than later, there will almost certainly be a pressure campaign in favor of an attack. That makes it important to emphasize that any such attack would be illegal and outrageous. Military action against Iran's nuclear facilities can't be justified as self-defense, especially since Iran possesses no nuclear weapons program. There is no legitimate basis for the U.S. or any other state to launch attacks on targets inside Iran.

Rejecting aggressive warfare has implications for other areas of U.S. foreign policy as well. If the U.S. refuses to start wars, it should also refuse to arm and support other states that launch illegal attacks in neighboring countries. Even when client governments dress up that aggression as "self-defense," the U.S. should not provide them with any weapons or military assistance so long as they are striking at their neighbors. That would mean cutting off support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE over their aggression in Yemen, and it would also mean no support for Israel while their government launches attacks against targets in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. should both refrain from aggression and stop enabling the aggression of others.

If the use of force is restricted only to self-defense, that implies that the U.S. should also renounce waging wars for ostensibly humanitarian reasons. This is not only because humanitarian interventions often fail to meet the criteria for just war, but also because the U.S. does not have the authority on its own or as part of a group of states to decide that the prohibition on the use of force can be disregarded whenever it sees fit.

It was fashionable after the 1999 U.S./NATO intervention in Kosovo to describe that war as "illegal but legitimate," but if the prohibition means anything it can't be violated like that. If NATO is to be a truly defensive alliance, it shouldn't be used as a platform for wars that

have nothing to do with the defense of its members.

It is commonplace for politicians and policymakers to say that they believe war should be a last resort, but in practice far too many Americans rush to support military options whether they make any sense or not. Despite being citizens of the most powerful country in the world, many of our leaders encourage us to be frightened of minuscule and manageable dangers on the other side of the world. If we would have a foreign policy that isn't defined by constant warfare and fearmongering, Americans will have to learn not to be so easily alarmed.

The United States is extraordinarily secure from physical attack, so the instances when the U.S. needs to use force to defend itself will be very rare. An integral part of not going abroad in search of monsters to destroy is to refuse to concoct excuses for taking military action against states that don't and usually can't threaten our country.

What the Iraq War experience taught us is that the United States needs to take advantage of its natural security, and be willing to fight only when our country or one of our treaty allies comes under attack. The temptation to start or join wars unrelated to self-defense will always be present, and that is why it is imperative that we as Americans learn from the folly of the last twenty years.

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Featured image: Coffins of dead U.S. soldiers arriving at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware in 2006. (U.S. government photo)

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