
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Stephen A. Bourque, Jeffrey D. McCausland, Jonathan Reed Winkler


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**Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge**

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Thomas Nichols’ *Eve of Destruction: The Coming Age of Preventive War* (2008) adds an important and somewhat different perspective to the 2008 H-Diplo roundtables on the topic of the 1990s and George W. Bush’s strategy in the “War on Terror”. Philip Gordon and Ian Shapiro recommend a return to containment and a rejection of the Bush national security doctrine for dealing with terror with its emphasis on the U.S. right to act unilaterally and militarily anywhere in the world without the approval of the UN or major allies; its assertion of the right to take preventive actions against an emerging threat; and its emphasis on advancing democracy against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. Tony Smith, however, argues that a revived containment could “morph back into the Bush Doctrine” if the military and political situation improves in Iraq (as it has done so in the past six months). Like Smith, both Walter Hixson and Joan Hoff favor a more fundamental shift in policy to cooperation versus Bush’s unilateralism. From a realist perspective, Andrew Bacevich is also far more skeptical of containment in its post-1950s excesses based on American preoccupations with consumption, the reliance of imperial presidents on “National Security Ideology,” and illusions about the efficacy of military power. Hal Brands also focuses on post-Cold War strategy and the less than successful efforts of three U.S. presidents to develop, sell to the American public, and implement a replacement for containment. Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier devote more attention to the question of whether or not September 11th brought a transformation in the challenges faced by U.S. leaders and how skillfully the presidents and their advisers before 9/11 addressed the problems emerging out of the end of the Cold War.¹

Professor Nichols’ study enhances our understanding of the post-Cold War period with a different orientation than that of the authors cited above. Nichols focuses on the emergence of prevention as an increasingly popular alternative to Cold War deterrence. Recognizing the traditional existence of prevention extending back to the Peloponnesian War and recent examples such as Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, Nichols carefully distinguishes between prevention and preemption, noting that the latter traditionally “requires concrete evidence of an immediate attack”, such as the Israeli attack at the start of the 1967 war. Prevention, however, “in its simplest terms means destroying threats before they can actually coalesce, despite the absence of any direct evidence of immediate danger.” Nichols notes the distinguishing difference between the two based on the “imminence” of the threat, and the efforts of all leaders, including George Bush (in the Bush Doctrine of 2002 and 2006,) to emphasize preemption for what is a strategy of prevention. (4-11) Noting the threat of increased forms of preventive action against the sovereignty of nations, failed states, and terrorist groups within states as a threat to the international order, Nichols concludes by recommending reform of the United Nations

¹ Roundtables on the authors may be located on the H-Diplo website at http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/
Security Council by limiting membership to established democracies and revising the veto power within the Security Council to enable a supermajority to override vetos.

The reviewers welcome Nichols’ assessments although they question to some extent both his analysis of preemption and deterrence and his proposed solution:

1) Nichols’ emphasis on the increasing resort of major powers to preemption in the post-Cold War period before 9/11 and the Bush Doctrine is welcomed by the reviewers. In *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* Cholett and Goldgeier offer a similar assessment by highlighting the increasing shift of President Clinton and his advisers to unilateralism outside the UN and with NATO on Bosnia and Kosovo and without NATO on Iraq as Clinton moved by 1996 from containment to removal of Saddam Hussein and in retaliatory cruise missile strikes against al-Qaeda in August 1998 in response to attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Jonathan Winkler applauds Nichols’ skirting of Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and his focus on the extent to which the notion of preventative war was accepted before 2003. Stephen Bourque, however, questions Nichols on whether “we are somehow in a new age of intervention.” (2) Bourque notes the degree of U.S. intervention in Latin America and European intervention in colonized and weaker states in Africa and Asia. The “good old days” of Cold War containment brought extensive levels of intervention by both the Red Army in Eastern Europe and U.S. forces in the Dominican Republic in 1965 as well as a range of covert interventions. “The principle is that a strong state could intervene against the weak when its interests were threatened and the victim’s powerful protector did not object,” concludes Bourque. (2) In his response, Nichols qualifies his focus to the major powers acting in Western Europe and the northern Western Hemisphere with at least a pretense of respecting sovereignty in the Cold War. “What has changed,” Nichols argues, is the dropping of pretence so that “sovereignty exists only for the very strongest nations, with the sovereignty of smaller nations either a matter of convenience or negotiation among the larger powers.” (2)

2) Jeffrey McCausland questions Nichols’ second major thesis that deterrence has lost its importance in the international system since 1990. Nichols links the decline in the creditability of deterrence to the threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and especially nuclear weapons and increasing pressure to take preventive action against potential proliferators such as North Korea in 1994 and Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Libya. (46-52) McCausland, however, suggests that deterrence is a consideration in the perspective of states trying to obtain WMD such as North Korea or Iran. Hussein apparently did not rebuild WMD after the Gulf War in 1991 but he certainly wanted to maintain the impression that he had in order to deter his domestic adversaries as well as enemies in the neighborhood and the United States. His deception worked only too well with the Clinton and Bush administrations. Bourque suggests that deterrence continues to be an important consideration with respect to the actions if not the rhetoric of North Korea and Iran. (2) Nichols, however, emphasizes that what is most important is that the major powers have lost faith in deterrence and “now refuse to assume that new threats
from new actors can be held at bay the way they were once were (or the way we thought they were, anyway) forty years ago.” (3)

3) Where deterrence has had less impact, as Nichols notes (52-62), is in dealing with non-state groups including al-Qaeda that have little to lose in challenging a major power. In the American ‘war on drugs’ since the 1980s the U.S. has had little success in applying anything resembling deterrence on drug traffickers outside the U.S. and the British never developed an effective deterrent policy to deal with the challenge of the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, a leader such as Muammar Qaddafi of Libya shifted from involvement with international terrorist acts after 9/11 to ending his WMD program and normalization of relations with the U.S. The reviewers note that technology may have brought the most change in both generating pressure for interventions in states (especially when television spreads images around the globe of humanitarian disasters) and increasing the ability of small groups to project, as Bourque notes, “destructive power against the citizens and cities with those they have a quarrel. Using aircraft and personal computers as weapons, they may now directly operate against the primary power’s once safe homeland.” (2) Bourque, however, suggests that not much has changed: “These are all cases of powerful states or coalitions attacking weaker states, within the context of the current balance of power. Little has changed since President Woodrow Wilson ordered General John J. Pershing to pursue Pancho Villa’s bandits in Mexico in 1916.” (3)

4) The reviews are skeptical about Nichols’ recommendations for reversing the trend of preventive interventions into sovereign states. Nichols considers three alternatives: (1) pretend that interventions by powers such as Russia in Georgia, or the U.S. in Pakistan, or Israel in Gaza are not taking place; (2) organize the major powers into a new Congress of Vienna to validate the use of force by members in order to maintain the stability of the international system; or, (3) reform the United Nations so that a revised Security Council of recognized liberal powers without an absolute veto will carry out all necessary humanitarian interventions (Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia) as well as police actions against aggressors, WMD proliferators, and abettors of terrorists. Recognizing the obstacles to option three such as the unwillingness of Russia and China to accept exclusion from the club and the unlikelihood of any major power giving up its veto power, Nichols nevertheless offers this option as the best choice. “His recommendations are bold, sweeping and provocative,” concludes Winkler (3); McCausland suggests that they are “unworkable” and too “narrow” in their omission of the potential role of regional organizations, international institutions such as the International Court of Justice, and the role of diplomatic options such as arms control and nonproliferation agreements (4); and Bourque notes that the existing cooperation of the major power in the current economic crisis points to a shared desire for stability and predicts that the UN “will continue to serve mankind as a central source for humanitarian assistance and limited peacekeeping operations” as the major powers do the heavy lifting against weaker states without approaching the ‘eve of destruction.’
5) In his response Nichols admits that he “chose to argue for the reinvention of the United Nations because [he] simply did not know what else to do.” He has reluctantly concluded that UN is “the only answer” except for ad hoc coalitions. The United States, according to Nichols, should take the lead and “lay its veto on the table” of the Security Council as well as pursue other unilateral alternatives such as the reduction of strategic nuclear weapons. To avoid destruction, Nichols recommends that the U.S. be “both weaker and stronger, [and] let go of cherished privileges on one hand while maintaining a readiness on the other to wield the sword.”

(6) Recent roundtable authors would not completely disagree with Nichols’ recommendations, although they tend to put more emphasis on reform of U.S. policy and attitudes than international relations as expressed by the major powers. Andrew Bacevich, for example, in The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism, recommends the elimination of nuclear weapons, but Bacevich is more focused on reforming American attitudes—an end to the sense of exceptionalism, profligacy in the consumption of resources and consumerism, and illusions about the efficacy of military means. Both Walter Hixson in The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy and Joan Hoff in A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility devote more attention than Nichols to the domestic sources shaping U.S. foreign policy problems including exceptionalism, Hixson’s cultural emphasis on the U.S. as exceptionally aggressive and frequently resorting to war in response to internal psychic crises, and Hoff’s focus on the impact of race, religious beliefs, economic concerns, and executive domination of foreign policy as sources of U.S. problems. Future roundtables on books that discuss U.S. strategy, such as Melvyn Leffler and Jeffrey Legro’s To Lead the World: American Strategy After the Bush Doctrine and Timothy J. Lynch and Robert S. Singh’s After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy will offer further reflections on these issues.

Participants:

Tom Nichols is a professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College where he also holds the Forrest Sherman Chair of Public Diplomacy. He holds a PhD from Georgetown University. He is currently a senior associate of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs in New York, a fellow of the International History Institute at Boston University, and a fellow of the International Security Program and the Project on Managing the Atom at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The opinions are those of the writer.

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**Jonathan Reed Winkler** is an assistant professor of history at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. The author of *Nexus: Strategic Communications and American Security in World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008) -- the subject of a spring H-Diplo roundtable -- he is a historian of U.S. diplomatic, military and naval history, and international affairs in the modern era. Winkler is a graduate of Ohio University’s Honors Tutorial College and received his Ph.D. in diplomatic and international history from Yale University in 2004. His current book project is an analysis of how the United States government coordinated commercial and military communications networks to meet transforming global strategic interests across the entire 20th century.
I found it almost impossible to read Thomas M. Nichols’ *Eve of Destruction* without Barry McGuire’s 1965 recording with the same title running through the back of my mind. The growing war in Indo-China, civil violence in the old south, the rising power of Communist China, the duplicity of politicians, and the never-ending threat of nuclear war, cast a shadow over the baby-boom generation’s future. Indeed, it did get worse. Over the next few years, bloody battles in Vietnam, assassinations in Memphis and Los Angeles, riots across American cities and universities, and the impeachment proceedings against the President of the United States, all lent support to the idea that the end was at hand. Somehow, the republic weathered the storm and prospered into the twenty-first century. Forty-three years later, Professor Thomas M. Nichols, a professor at the Naval War College’s Strategy and Policy Department and currently a fellow of the International Security Program and the Program on Managing the Atom at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, warns that we are again on the eve of Armageddon. He argues that even before the events of September 11, the world had begun to discard the old inhibitions on intervening with military force in the internal affairs of other states. He suggests that media attention on disasters such as those that occurred in Bosnia and Somalia and the destructive power of international terrorist groups as displayed in a host of attacks in Spain, Russia, the United States and other countries has helped to create this trend. Not willing to risk disaster or attack, individual nations are becoming more inclined to use military force to prevent a calamity or attack from occurring. If this happens, Nichols argues, the “international system will return to a condition of anarchy and bloodshed not seen since the collapse of the League of Nations.” (4) As a solution, he suggests that a restructured, veto-proof, United Nations Security Council could legitimize interventions and constrain those nations that believe a preventive attack is in their national interests from acting alone. (137-144)

As one would expect from someone with Professor Nichols’ credentials, this is an extremely well written and thought-provoking book, and a simple review only scratches at the depth of the issues he raises. His argument that barriers to intervening in the affairs of other nation-states began falling before the final attack on the World Trade Center is convincing. He argues that the principles enshrined in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which established the primacy of international sovereignty, and the Caroline Test (1837), that permitted the preemptive resort to violence in self-defense only in the case of overwhelming necessity, are no longer respected by the international community. (9, 15). Citing what he believes to be the international dismissal of the principles enshrined in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), founding the principal of the primacy of international sovereignty, and the Caroline test (1837), requiring that the resort to violence in self-defense only in the case of overwhelming necessity, is over. (9, 15) As early as 1995, many in the world had already decided that there were compelling reasons for those states with the ability to apply military force to use it in places like Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia. It
was only a short step from entering or even attacking a state to prevent humanitarian disaster to attacking to preventing an attack. The United States invoked this right, the so-called “Bush Doctrine,” to justify its military assault on Iraq, and it remains a cornerstone of current doctrine. As the 2008 Russian attack on Georgia confirms, the penchant for strong powers to use military force against weaker states is alive and well. Furthermore, Nichols goes on to argue that the concept of deterrence, the mainstay of Cold War diplomacy, is dead. Can a state, determined to immolate itself be deterred? Are so-called rogue states, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, North Korea, and Iraq, beyond deterrence? Do these states, as he alleges, have “nothing to protect or save”? (10-11)

This reviewer, however, is not convinced that the current situation is as dire as Professor Nichols believes, and I take issue with the concept that we are somehow in a new age of intervention or preventive war. The ideas enshrined by Westphalia and the Caroline test may apply to Western Europe and the northern Western Hemisphere, but have never applied to the rest of the world. By 1934, the United States Marine Corps alone was boasting that it had conducted one hundred and eighty landings since the beginning of the republic. Almost all of these were in less developed states or regions of the world and executed usually to protect American lives and property or to exact some kind of revenge for a hostile act.1 The United States Army, although militarily weak in comparison to its European counterparts, complemented the Marines by interventions against weaker states primarily in Latin America. Certainly, the Europeans did not refer to Westphalia or any other treaty when they began intervening in Africa or Asia in the century after the Congress of Vienna (1812-1822). Militarily weak states became essentially colonies of the European powers. Those that attempted to throw off the European yoke received the full weight of military power as in the case of the Indian Mutiny (1847) or the Boxer Rebellion (1899). The situation changed little in the post-Second World War/Cold War era. American forces intervened for a variety of reasons in independent states, without approval from the United Nations, in Latin America and the Middle East. Lebanon (1958), the Dominical Republic (1965), and Panama (1989) are just a few of the many cases of American forces unilaterally intervening in the affairs of a sovereign, but weaker, nation. The Soviet Union conducted itself in a similar manner within its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, most notably Czechoslovakia (1968). The principle is that a strong state could intervene against the weak when its interests were threatened and the victim’s powerful protector did not object.

It is also doubtful, in deference to Professor Nichols’ comments concerning its demise, that deterrence is no longer an effective tool for statesmen. What examples do we have of so-called rogue states executing military action that will insure its demise? While both North Korea and Iran may be bellicose, their leaders realize that a direct attack on any major power or alliance would cause a profound change in its way of life. The current chaos in Iraq is ample evidence of the results of taunting those with overwhelming

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military capabilities. American resolve, as demonstrated by Operation Desert Fox and other actions, effectively deterred even Saddam Hussein. The idea that he had any stockpiles or weapons of mass destruction capability by the end of the 1990s rests on very slim and controversial evidence. In addition, as strategic analyst Jeffery Record has pointed out, the overwhelming combat capability of the United States “deterred” Hussein from any significant aggression against the United States.²

What is different in this new world is the technological dimension. No longer can millions die in distant parts of the world without images flashing on television sets in the west. The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1871), that resulted in over 20 million Chinese deaths elicited little popular outcry in Europe or the United States. Now, thanks to the power of the visual medium, the world’s citizens have front-row seats to unfolding humanitarian disasters in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda. Like Vice President Al Gore in 1995, parents around the world have to explain to their children the nature of these disasters and demand that their governments, in Western Europe as well as the United States, prevent them. (17) Also new is the ability of formerly marginal organizations, such as Al Qaida or any other terrorist group, to project destructive power against the citizens and cities with those they have a quarrel. Using aircraft and personal computers as weapons, they may now directly operate against the primary power’s once-safe homeland. This dynamic, however, does not fundamentally change the nature of interventions, preemptive or preventive. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombed Serbia over Kosovo, the United States invaded Afghanistan to root out the Taliban and destroy Al Qaida over the World Trade Center, Russia attacked Georgia over South Ossetia, and the United States uses remotely piloted vehicles to destroy suspected insurgent groups in Yemen and Pakistan. These are all cases of powerful states or coalitions attacking weaker states, within the context of the current balance of power. Little has changed since President Woodrow Wilson ordered General John J. Pershing to pursue Pancho Villa’s bandits into Mexico in 1916.

This brings me to my final problem with Professor Nichols’ articulate argument. A restructuring of the United Nations Security Council to be more effective in regulating this apparent increase in international intervention, preemption and preventive war has little chance of realization. The major participants in the new balance of power are an interesting combination of states and coalitions. Not all are, or ever will be, liberal democracies. China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, each with restrictive governments, parry the democracies of the United States, India, Japan, and the European Union. Yet, as evidenced by the international cooperation during the current economic crisis, all seek stability in the world. War among these powers is less likely than probably any time in the last fifty years. However, military intervention against weaker states, with the approval or acquiescence of the primary members, will continue. Moreover, the United Nations will continue to serve mankind as a central source for humanitarian assistance

² Jeffery Record, Dark Victory: America’s Second War against Iraq (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 145.
and limited peacekeeping operations. Just as in 1965, I do not believe we are on the ‘eve of destruction.’

My concerns and reservations should not detract from the value of this book. It is extremely provocative and is an essential contribution to the debate that those who frame our national security structure should be having. Thomas Nichols has challenged the scholarly and governing communities to revisit the norms that have framed our foreign policy, at least since the end of the Cold War. His warnings and solutions should receive careful consideration by all students of diplomatic history.
And you tell me over and over and over again my friend
ah you don’t believe we’re on the eve of destruction...

-- Barry McGuire, singer and songwriter

Barry McGuire wrote and performed the song "Eve of Destruction" in the 1960’s. He would certainly accept the central premise of the Tom Nichols' book by the same title. Nichols argues in a cogent fashion that fundamental international norms with respect to the inviolability of state sovereignty and the unacceptability of preventive war have eroded over the past decade. This development is compounded by efforts of both state and non-state actors to acquire weapons of mass destruction. The overall result is a world where the threat of mass casualties from a terrorist suicide attack, humanitarian disasters from acts of genocide, and the problem of failed states are rising at an alarming rate.

Nichols accomplishes his task without being excessively bogged down in an analysis of the Bush Doctrine or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather he pursues a historical examination supplemented by interviews of policymakers from around the globe. This allows the author to demonstrate that this evolution is occurring not only in the United States. Leaders in France, Russia, Japan, India and other states seem to contemplate more and more the option of preventive war. Consequently, the globe is witnessing a widespread breakdown in the adherence to century-old traditions of diplomatic conduct and international law. The inevitable question is whether the emerging international system can find new coping mechanisms or the advent of preventive war will push the planet closer to chaos and the lyrics of Barry McGuire from forty years ago.

Nichols' impressive historical analysis traces the current understanding of the decision to go to war to the "Caroline test" from 1837 (2). The American merchant ship Caroline was destroyed by British militia in Canada for allegedly being used to support anti-British rebels. The subsequent diplomatic dispute between Washington and London resulted in not only a British apology but also a clear understanding of the limits with which force could be used in the modern international system. The author notes that the resulting principle was clearly articulated by then Secretary of State Daniel Webster. He observed that in future the resort to violence by any state would be judged by whether it was motivated by a necessity that was "instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice or means, and no moment for deliberation."(2)

This would suffice as a clear norm for states contemplating the use of force in the 19th and most of the 20th centuries. But clearly this norm is now in question, as Australian Defense Minister Robert Hill indicated when he asked, following the Bali bombing in 2002, "how should these principles be interpreted in the age of over-the-horizon
weaponry, computer network attack and asymmetric threats when warning times are reduced virtually to zero and enemies can strike almost anywhere?" (89)

The task of discussing "preventive" war can only be accomplished with a degree of intellectual precision. Nichols accomplishes this task by clearly articulating the difference between "preemption" and "prevention". He cites the Israeli preemptive attack on its Arab neighbors in 1967 as the classic example of preemption. The Israeli situation during that crisis combined national vulnerability with a high degree of certainty that an attack that would threaten Israel's actual survival was imminent. (5) Nichols observes that preventive war has existed since the Peloponnesian War. Ancient Spartan leaders decided they had to initiate a conflict with Athens in order to prevent the Athenians from continuing to shift the balance of power away from Sparta. Modern examples include the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor or the German decision to invade Norway in World War II. But these modern examples were subsequently condemned by the international community in the war's aftermath. American policymakers considered preventive war with the USSR at the onset of the Cold War and during the Cuban missile crisis but rejected this option on practical grounds and a recognition that it violated cultural norms.

Nichols also critiques the traditional view of "deterrence" as a fundamental tenet of the international system. He describes it today as "a useless totem, a word representing a kind of magical thinking that places great faith in the hope that the enemy is much like ourselves." (45) Sadly, his arguments are persuasive in light of the proliferation of states equipped with weapons of mass destruction and the seeming futility of attempting to "deter" a terrorist like Osama bin Laden. This argument was perhaps initially made by Thomas Friedman in his celebrated book, The Lexus and the Olive Tree. Friedman argued even prior to September 11th 2001 that the modern world must find the means to mitigate the threat posed by the so-called "super powered individual" in light of the advent of modern means of transportation and weaponry.  

Still Eve of Destruction does seem to ignore the fact that the motivation of states such as North Korea or Iran to obtain nuclear weapons is in part due to a desire to achieve a "minimal" deterrent. As an Indian general argued in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, any state that was threatened by the Great Powers (in particular the United States) needed to possess nuclear weapons in a crisis to deter an attack. Still one must accept Colin Gray's description of deterrence as largely reactive. In his words, "a policy that seeks security through deterrence knowingly concedes the vital power of decision to the foe." (60)

Some might believe that Eve of Destruction is based exclusively in a realist paradigm of the emerging international system. But Nichols does an excellent job of dispelling that notion with his analysis of the moral questions posed by genocide and its connection to

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preventive warfare. Most international scholars would still argue that the Charter of the United Nations enshrines the notion of the inviolability of sovereignty that outlaws interference in those issues essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of each sovereign state. Despite this the author notes that humanitarian disasters from Somalia to Rwanda to the murder of defenseless Bosnian men and boys at Srebrenica have become "conversation-stoppers in polite Western circles."(27) Consequently, the world community can not continue to sit idly by as genocide is conducted. As a report chaired by Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans noted, "in some circumstances, threatened genocide conspicuous among them, military intervention is not merely defensible, but a compelling obligation."(33) This still begs difficult questions. When is genocide being committed? Is it imminent or can other diplomatic means still be exercised? How is international will created to sanction preventive war? Still Nichols is correct when he asserts that the realization must now exist that the debate has shifted from whether states may intervene against each other for moral or humanitarian reasons to when and how they may do so. (35)

Nichols successfully navigates the shoals of partisanship in the inevitable analysis of the Bush Doctrine. (99) While the author criticizes the administration for making an "option" into a "doctrine", he is at the same time sympathetic. He argues that its enunciation in the National Security Strategy of the United States (beginning in 2002) was an "effect" and not a "cause" of the collapse of existing standards. Rather Nichols describes this as the onset of an open discussion that policymakers had long avoided which underscored the reality that events were rapidly overtaking analysis. He further disputes the argument that the United States or others major powers will now be reluctant to conduct preventive warfare in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion that discovered no weapons of mass destruction and became a quagmire. While this may be true, it is worthwhile to reflect on Bob Woodward’s observation in his recent book, The War Within that analyzes decision-making in the Bush White House. Woodward notes that "the decision to go to war is one that defines a nation, both to the world and perhaps more importantly, to itself. There is no more serious business for a national government, no more accurate measure of national leadership."2

Still despite the sad state that has been the Iraq War, according to the author the attacks of September 11th, 2001 served as a watershed not only for the United States but for all nations. Non-state actors equipped with weapons of mass destruction and a willingness to commit mass suicide were suddenly a reality. Terrorists were no longer a nuisance that could easily be ignored.(59) The distinguished Yale University international scholar John Gaddis summed this up when he observed that "the old distinction between preemption and prevention...was one of the many casualties of September 11."(11) Obviously, other states such as Russia or India (following the Mumbai attacks) could decide to imitate the American approach.

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If there is a weakness to *Eve of Destruction*, it is the prescription. (116) Nichols suggests that in light of the emerging international system there are only three possible outcomes. First, the world simply continues to pretend that the established norms still remain viable. Second, the great powers grant each other the exceptional right to use force as they deem appropriate in an effort to maintain system stability. He dismisses these two alternatives and accepts, albeit unwillingly, a third option -- reform of the United Nations and other international institutions. His critique of the UN as it is now constituted is withering. He describes it as an "organization designed as the solution to a particular problem that no longer exists."(120)

Still while noting that increasing the size of the Security Council will have little effect, Nichols’ solution of allowing only liberal democracies to be Council members and to eliminate the veto seem equally unworkable for several reasons. First, the prescription is unnecessarily narrow. It ignores the potential role of strengthened regional organizations (OSCE, OAU, OAS, etc.) acting at the behest of the United Nations. It also plays little heed to the role of an enhanced importance for the International Court of Justice, resurrection of the Trusteeship Council to deal with failed states, or the use of other diplomatic instruments such as arms control to enhance international stability. Second, what would be the mechanism whereby we would identify which states are the true "liberal democracies"? Presumably Prime Minister Putin would argue vigorously that the Russian Federation is such a democracy. Finally, why would current members such as Russia or China willingly give up their existing veto?

In summary, *Eve of Destruction* is an important book. It arrives at a particularly auspicious moment with the onset of a new administration in Washington that must confront a world of increasing turmoil. This is particularly worrying in light of the recent release of the report by the Commission on Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism. The commission echoed the arguments presented by Professor Nichols. It warned that the use nuclear or biological weapons by a terrorist group were becoming increasingly likely in the next five years. Preventive war as a realistic option is no longer an aberration or an exception to the central tenets of the international system. World leaders must confront the fact that the question is no longer whether preventive war will be used but rather how and under what circumstances.
2009 will mark twenty years since the beginning of the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in 1989 began a remarkable two year period that saw, in short order, the reunification of Germany, the spasmodic demand for democracy in China, widespread international cooperation against Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the peaceable collapse of the Soviet Union itself. While few would mourn the passing of the Soviet empire, one can make the case that the seeming stability and strategic clarity brought by the Cold War are sorely missed now in some quarters. Despite the best wishes of many, history did not end. In the years since the end of the Cold War no new effective international structure has really emerged. Terrible events have since occurred across the globe. The great powers, even those allied to one another, are divided over their strategic priorities. Most people, if pressed, would identify concepts rather than concrete things as the primary worries on the international stage. Twenty years on and despite the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical environment is more complex than ever before. It is hard, therefore, to make firm projections about the future when the present is so muddled.

Nonetheless, in his new book *Eve of Destruction*, Tom Nichols has offered us a solid though dark projection about the future, if only to appeal to policymakers to take the steps necessary to avoid that future. Nichols, a political scientist and professor of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, sought to investigate how the world had changed since the end of the Cold War. In so doing, he wanted to avoid both current political debates and, as he termed it, the “scholastic miasma” of academic debates over international relations theory. (xi) Nichols has concluded that we have reached an age of preventive war, where the once-strong taboo against launching wars absent a manifest threat of imminent attack has weakened if not vanished. Nichols has identified in this book what he believes are the real origins of this shift in international norms, clarified the nature of the danger, and offered potential solutions. In his view, this widespread trend, if left unchecked, will lead to the collapse of the post-1945 international system as we have known it, the discrediting of democracies committed to the rule of law, and genuine danger. The best way forward, as he would have it, is to co-opt this growing tendency in a reformed United Nations Security Council made up only of proven liberal democracies committed to upholding both justice and security in the international realm.

Nichols constructs this argument in a compact fashion. The crux of the matter is the intersection of two key trends: the acceptance by the international community of the idea that it is permissible to intervene in the sovereign affairs of a country in certain circumstances, and the conclusion by many states that deterrence is no longer an effective tool. Nichols places the former as a critical development of the 1990s, emerging from the humanitarian and security problems generated by Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo. But what seemed right in the name of justice may have been wrong from the point of view of security, because the precedents set in the process legitimized the
procedure. Related to this is the second trend, the decline of deterrence as a meaningful concept. Here Nichols makes a clear case that the shifts in perceptions about threats, and the emergence of apparently new kinds of threats (particularly terrorist groups possibly armed with nuclear weapons), meant that states were unwilling to trust to passive defense (or just alliance support) because this alone might not prevent attacks and casualties. The alternative was a proactive stance, rather than a reactive one, and included the ready use of military force where necessary. When the feared terrorist attack materialized on September 11, 2001, then, the theoretical danger from non-state actors like terrorist groups to launch a strike yielding disproportionate damage ceased to be theoretical. One consequence, somewhat logically, was the National Security Strategy of 2002 that pushed the defensive perimeter of the U.S. farther forward, well away from the United States, and proposed the use of preventive measures (including military ones) rather than reactive actions against threats. The two earlier trends combined, so that violations of a nation’s sovereignty were acceptable, whether for humanitarian reasons or the prevention of undeterrable attacks, while full acquiescence by the United Nations was no longer necessary (as Kosovo had shown). Particularly valuable here is Nichols’ steadfast refusal to be dragged into any extended assessment of the rightness or wrongness of the decision to take Iraq in 2003. Instead, he devotes chapter four to an evaluation of whether the idea of preventive war is something with international acceptance or unique to the Bush administration. Notably he concludes that it has much greater global acceptance than normally supposed, and that this attitude predates 2003. Divorcing Iraq and the issue of preventive war is key for any further consideration of this. Nichols goes on to project that while there will not be any major preventive wars like that against Iraq, the near term future will likely have other forms of preventive action. The key question, then, is whether other states will take steps to arrest this dangerous trend, or whether a host of independent actions like targeted assassination or limited incursions will occur with all of the attending strains on the international system that would result. Nichols offers in his last chapter his own prescriptions for how to bring about this restraint, but his recommendations are bold, sweeping, and provocative.

The work is certainly timely, if measured only by the recent discussions in the United States and elsewhere about going after terrorist training facilities in Pakistan or stopping pirates along the Somali coast. And as a predictive tool, Nichols’ analysis may well be right that the future will see more states worried about new threats and unwilling to seek formal international approval through a vacillating body such as the UN. I think he is also correct, as he tours the likely trouble spots of the world in chapter five, that the most likely form of these preventive military operations will be the sort of small-scale actions like missile strikes or targeted direct action by special forces. Such military actions appear to be a cheap way to solve the danger while freeing political leaders of the headaches (and costs) associated with “Phase IV” military occupation after an invasion. Only time will bear out these conclusions.

For the historian, Nichols’ book offers several things worth chewing over. The first is this theoretical framework for understanding the significance of the events of the 1990s. The
integration of these trends (the gradual weakening of state sovereignty, the erosion of the United Nations, and the apparent evisceration of the Cold War-era deterrence) is key, and it offers a way to engage the complexity of the 1990s and link it to what comes after 2001 without overdetermining the path to Iraq in 2003. The second is his attention to the larger international context for the whole preventive war discussion. By sidestepping the exceptionalist idea that the U.S. has the sole responsibility for reintroducing preventive war, Nichols has forced us to broaden the question, and to reconsider the real influence and interests of the other allies who did support or accompany the United States into all operations (not just Iraq or Afghanistan) after 2001. A third, and related, point is that Nichols’ treatment of these sovereignty and deterrence issues is a reminder that historians will want to be very, very careful about focusing on what has gone on since September 2001 from the narrow view of conventional military action or just the U.S. Indeed, what has gone on since September 2001 has been war in a variety of forms in a multiplicity of places—soldiers in Afghanistan or Iraq are only one part of a much more complex story. The scope of military action is very broad, and the temptation for conducting preventive unconventional or small military operations is very great. That is the dark future that concerns Nichols, not another Iraq. Historians attempting to explain war, strategy and policy, and international relations in the 1990s and since 2001 will have to take this into account.

As a new administration prepares to take office in Washington, D.C., scholars concerned with future policies are trying to gauge how much change there will actually be from the foreign policies of the United States of the last eight years. Whether Nichols’ conclusions will bear out is, for now, beyond our ken, but he presents a disturbingly compelling argument that, since I began reading the work, seemed to be on track. For those of us who study the past, the utility of this work lies in his helping us theorize about the evolution of the international system in the 1990s and the struggle to devise something out of the legacy of the Cold War. That process is not over, but our work to interpret it is only just beginning.
Let me begin, as so many other authors have, by thanking Tom Maddux for organizing this roundtable, and to the reviewers for their time and thoughtfulness. It is an honor to be able to present one’s work in such a lively and candid environment, and the reviews in this roundtable are illustrations of why authors value this venue so highly.

As I read the reviews by Professors Bourque, McCausland, and Winkler, two things occurred to me. First, the general agreement among the reviewers suggests the problem I have described in the book is so obvious that I should perhaps not be congratulated for discovering it; and second, my solution to that problem meets with such uniform skepticism that perhaps I should have thought more before committing it to paper.

I will focus first on where I and my reviewers agree, and then try to clarify some of their questions and concerns. I am pleased that my reviewers seemed to like the title of the book; to me it captured the sense of foreboding (or, as Jonathan Winkler rightly puts it, “a dark projection of the future”) that I felt while writing the book. (For the curious, the cover art depicts an actual thunderstorm gathering over downtown Philadelphia, and I owe my thanks to the folks at Penn Press’s graphics department for the dramatic art.)

1. Have things changed?

Both McCausland and Winkler seem generally to agree with my argument that things have changed in the international system--and probably for the worse, or at the least, in a less stable direction. As McCausland notes, “the realization must now exist that the debate has shifted from whether states may intervene against each other for moral or humanitarian reasons to when and how they may do so.”

Professor Bourque, however, zeroes in on an important criticism. He writes that he “is not convinced that the current situation is as dire as Professor Nichols believes,” and he takes “issue with the concept that we are somehow in a new age of intervention or preventive war.” He then notes that by “1934, the United States Marine Corps alone was boasting that it had conducted one hundred and eighty landings since the beginning of the republic. Almost all of these were in less developed states or regions of the world and executed usually to protect American lives and property or to exact some kind of revenge for a hostile act.” When I interviewed Robert Cooper at the EU, he made much the same point, wryly noting that Britain has long had an honorable tradition of preventive war called “the balance of power.” Bourque, Cooper, and others wondered if great power intervention isn’t all that new a phenomenon, and it is an excellent question.
The key here is that imperial maintenance or colonial adventurism is not the same as preventive war. As Bourque himself notes, “the ideas enshrined by Westphalia and the Caroline test may apply to Western Europe and the northern Western Hemisphere, but have never applied to the rest of the world.” Here, I would agree with Bourque's general point: the major powers never applied Westphalian concepts (or anything so specific as Caroline) to areas they did not regard as part of the international system, or to nations they did not in some way consider peers. But the notion of sovereignty was held rhetorically sacred, and when it was violated, there was on the part of the aggressor a kind of admission that a sin was afoot even during its commission. As I point out in the book, even the Soviet Union and the United States felt the need to pay honor to the non-intervention norm even when they were in the process of violating it.

What has changed, then, is that powerful nations no longer even pretend to take that norm seriously. In the 21st century, the strongest powers in the system have discarded any fiction about the protections of membership in the international community, and have made clear that quaint, legalistic notions of sovereignty no longer have much persuasiveness. Today, sovereignty exists only for the very strongest nations, with the sovereignty of smaller nations either a matter of convenience or negotiation among the larger powers. (Some might argue—and with ample reason—that globalization and the inability of almost any state to control the movement of money, people, and ideas across its borders means that even the most militarily powerful nations are no longer fully “sovereign,” either.)

It is this jettisoning of any pretense, as Professor Winkler points out, that undergirds the fear of chaos that motivates my (admittedly problematic) solutions.

2. Deterrence

I suspect that all three reviewers worry that I have buried traditional deterrence a little too quickly. I might well have been too influenced by the arguments of Keith Payne and others; it is, in any case, a provocative argument to question the theory in a country like the United States, where realism has such a deep hold on thinking about deterrence.

But I cannot be as sanguine as Professor Bourque. He writes: “While both North Korea and Iran may be bellicose, their leaders realize that a direct attack on any major power or alliance would cause a profound change in its way of life …. American resolve, as demonstrated by Operation Desert Fox and other actions, effectively deterred even Saddam Hussein.”

I would argue that Operation Desert Fox proved the exact opposite of Professor Bourque's point; if anything, Hussein's reaction showed how detached from reality he had become, but that was really not the point I was trying to argue.
Rather, I was trying to say that it has become beside the point to think about where deterrence “really works.” What matters is what militarily strong states think works, because when they lose faith in deterrence, they will take matters into their own hands. And the evidence, I would argue, is mounting that such states—who at one point only had to worry about deterring each other—now refuse to assume that new threats from new actors can be held at bay the way they once were (or the way we thought they were, anyway) forty years ago.

I am grateful to both Professor Winkler and Professor McCausland for recognizing that I did not want to get dragged into endless partisan bickering over the wisdom of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The invasion of Iraq might have been a bad idea, or a good idea poorly executed, or a good war gone wrong because of poor planning, or a reckless idea that was doomed from the start. But whatever one’s view of the war, the salient point is that it represented just how far the tolerance for risk among many powerful nations had fallen, and the disrepute into which realism and classical thinking about deterrence had fallen among political leaders and ordinary citizens. This unwillingness to tolerate risk is going to be a dominant feature of the international landscape, whether we like it or not—and regardless of political affiliation.

Of course, the Donald Rumsfeld approach to warfighting—itself a dolorous subject that will engage historians for years to come—will probably enter the strategy books for the next century as the object lesson in the wrong way to overthrow a regime. But again, the wisdom of the war and how it was conducted does not detract from the collapsing faith in deterrence that surrounded it, and we already have post-Iraq cases—Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia, and whatever it was that Israel did in Syria, among others—to suggest that while large, regime-changing operations will be rare, smaller acts of violence (all of them technically “acts of war”) will likely be the order of the day in the new age of prevention.

3. The United Nations

All three of my critics, I think, looked at my argument regarding the reinvigoration of the United Nations, and each, in a collegial and polite way, suggested that I am trying to accomplish something fundamentally impossible. Other critics were less kind, with some angry that I would consider the UN a blanket solution to anything, and others upset that I would empower the UN to become some sort of global posse, neither of which I had intended. (Suffice it to say I am not used to being outflanked on the right and the left at the same time.) At a conference in Boston, a colleague summed it up succinctly when he said: “Nothing you propose will prevent any of the horrors you describe—so what’s the point?”

He was right. My proposals will not avert the dangers of our current century—WMD, terrorism, rogue states, and other symptoms of the breakup of the Westphalian order—because I do not believe such problems can be solved. Instead, my actual project here
was to find a way for the major powers to cooperate in mitigating those dangers without allowing the world to slip into complete anarchy.

And so here, I am going to make a confession. I chose to argue for the reinvention of the United Nations because I simply did not know what else to do.

If that represents a lack of imagination, I will plead guilty. When I first wrote the article-length version of the book, a reviewer said to me: “This is unbelievably depressing, and I agree with your analysis … but what are you going to do about it?” I went back to the drawing board, and wore out more than a little shoe leather pacing about trying to answer that question.

In a recent review of the book, Austin Bay suggests that I am drawn to something like John McCain’s “Community of Democracies,” but while I flirted with that idea, I ultimately rejected it. I agree with those who argue that, for better or worse, the UN is the only game in town and always will be. (I did not go so far as Anne-Marie Slaughter’s call for the Security Council to issue death warrants against dictators, but I share the frustration with dictatorships that I suspect led her to such a solution.) The UN is too deeply institutionalized, especially outside the United States, and I seriously doubt whether any competing institution can really supplant it. If we are going to control the use of international violence in anything like an institutional framework, rather than in ad hoc coalitions, the UN is the only answer.

And so the question remains: can we dramatically reform the United Nations? I think we can, but I think it has to be something like a coercive, even \textit{imperial} reform. That is, the United States presents the world community with one of two alternatives:

(1) We demand the reform of the Security Council, but agree to severe limits on our power, including the loss of our absolute veto, for the good of humanity, and with the understanding that we hold ourselves to the highest standards represented in the United Nations Charter (and that, by extension, we will—by force, if need be -- hold everyone else to those standards).

Or

(2) We will abandon the Council, do as we please in the interests of our own security, and Heaven help anyone who gets in our way.

I know the first option is far-fetched, but I deeply fear the open adoption of the second option. (I disagree with those who think we have already reached that point. We, and the other great powers, are close to it, to be sure, but there is still time to avert such an anarchic outcome.)
I have trouble seeing a third way, and if there is someone out there who can, I would be eager to hear it. Jeff McCausland—one of the sharpest observers of international affairs I know—suggests that I don’t give enough credence to organizations like the OSCE, the African Union, the OAS and others. In a sense, we are in heated agreement. I desperately want those organizations to succeed. But without the shadow of a real Security Council behind them—that is, one composed of mature, developed, democratic, and militarily capable states—these regional groups will be little better than vigilantes with arm-patches, the “coalitions of the exasperated” that I mention in the book. (I would also argue that a “global NATO” is pretty much that second option anyway.)

Likewise, I completely endorse (as does Robert Cooper, in his writings) McCausland’s idea of a resurrected Trusteeship Council. But one look at the literature reveals angry scholars out there who will bristle at any such idea as “neocolonialism” and who—I am sorry to say—would almost rather see Africa or Asia or even the Caribbean descend into a tide of blood rather than accept a new trusteeship concept, no matter how many lives it would save.

Perhaps, as I report in the book, Philippe Errera is correct when he says that the Western powers have lost “the benefit of the doubt” for the time being, but even without the Iraq war, I believe that there are people who will prefer to wallow in self-righteous indignation rather than accept that certain parts of the world are, for the time being, incapable of governing themselves and therefore should be governed by someone else. The disorder in these areas will provide powerful temptations for preventive action, and someone, somewhere, is going to have to decide whether, when, and how those actions are executed. Only the UN, I would argue, can overcome the moral objections to such interventions, no matter how cynical, insincere, or politically motivated those objections might be.

4. The Veto

Frankly, I do not know how to get Russia, or France, or China to give up their veto. Russia and China are particular problems: in recent years, they have become something like emotional teenagers, threatening to lock themselves in the bathroom and hold their breath unless they get the Olympics or whatever other symbol of unwarranted respect they think they deserve. Discussion with them will not come easily, especially on a subject like the sacred veto.

Ironically, however, the erosion of the veto lies in its potential use. The veto, without doubt, has allowed Russia, China, and France to punch far above their weight in international affairs, but that has come with a price: each time someone uses, or even threatens, the veto, the Security Council’s stock, so to speak, is devalued. (Anyone who doubts the growing impotence of the Security Council need only ask Slobodan Milosevic or Saddam Hussein, had they not died -- or been executed -- in prison after being
deposed in the wake of preventive wars that were conducted with barely a nod to the Security Council.)

We can only hope to lead by example. If the United States were to lay its veto on the table, perhaps in tandem with Great Britain, and dare the other members of the “Permanent Five” to follow, it would at least be a start. (I believe that the United States needs to start exercising this kind of positive unilateralism on several fronts, including the reduction of strategic nuclear weapons.). And such a moment is not impossible; the veto was debated in 1945, and there’s no reason to think that the strongest power in the world--indeed, the strongest power ever--cannot reopen the issue.

The implicit threat in all this, of course, is that a veto is only a veto if everyone at the table in Turtle Bay thinks it is and acts as if it has meaning. The United States, if reform is thwarted, can choose to stop believing in the veto--and for that matter, in the UN. If the Russians and Chinese insist that their veto be absolute, the United States and Great Britain can negate that position instantly -- as NATO did in 1999 and as the U.S. and it allies did in 2003 -- by simply refusing to take important issues before the UN. For all their juvenile bluster, the last thing Beijing or Moscow really wants is a world in which nations only send an ambassador to New York for the fine dining and evenings on Broadway.

But in the end, my critics are all correct on two major points: Westphalia was never as strong as we thought, and the Security Council is probably far more ossified than I want to believe. I still think there is time to avert complete chaos, but it will require significant bravery on the part of the United States, an American willingness both to be weaker and stronger, to let go of cherished privileges on one hand while maintaining a readiness on the other to wield the sword -- one admittedly blunted by recent misuse -- in order to pull the world away from the eve of destruction.

My thanks again to Professors Maddux, Bourque, McCausland, and Winkler. I am grateful for their comments and honored by their willingness to contribute their views.

On a final note of harmony among my reviewers, at least we all liked the song.