
Interview with Dr. Ashton Carter

Dr. Ashton Carter is the Ford Foundation Professor of Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and co-director, with former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, of the Harvard-Stanford Preventive Defense Project. From 1993-1996, he served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, where his responsibilities included national security policy toward states of the former USSR regarding arms control, countering proliferation worldwide, and oversight of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and missile defense programs.

He has twice received the Department of Defense Distinguished Service Medal, the highest award given by the Pentagon. Before his government service, Carter was director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at The Kennedy School. Carter received bachelor's degrees in medieval history and physics from Yale University and a doctorate in theoretical physics from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar.

He spoke with The Fletcher Forum's Annelena Lobb and Anthony Keats from Cambridge, MA, on November 1, 2004. Dr. Carter's interview also sheds light on ideas he discussed during "Preemptive Use of Force: A Reassessment."

FORUM: Long before the promulgation of the Bush Doctrine, the U.S. had left open the policy option of a preemptive military strike against a rogue state. Secretary of State Colin Powell has called preemption a "very useful tool" to have in the U.S. foreign policy "toolbag." What do you think changes when preemption stops being one of many options and becomes a doctrine?

CARTER: The proper role of preemption is as an option, and not a doctrine. That is because there are other ways of dealing with WMD that might also prove useful in certain circumstances. They range from missile defense against nuclear missile attack to arms control agreements like the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Preemption is one tool that we use as a last resort, when the others have not proved effective. As such, as an option, all U.S. presidents have had and insisted upon [preemption]... I participated in 1994 in the planning of an air strike on the North Korean nuclear facility at Yongbyon, which would have created a precedent of American preemption eight years before the invasion of Iraq... The question is, what good is done by declaring something that is a policy option to be a doctrine? It suggests that you are undervaluing the other tools in your toolkit, which oughtn't to be the case.

FORUM: How do you think the Bush Doctrine changes other countries' expectations of U.S. actions?

CARTER: Well, I think that promulgating this with great fanfare doesn't serve the national interest. It's not strategically smart to trumpet this possibility. It created controversy where there needn't be any controversy. I think the Administration was

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intent upon justifying the invasion of Iraq, and for that reason tried to create a doctrine of preemption in association with one particular incident. But bad cases make bad law, and individual foreign policy situations make bad doctrine—particularly individual situations that were as unusual as Iraq was.

FORUM: In lieu of something like preemption, what policies do you think belong at the top of our national security agenda?

CARTER: Clearly, dealing with WMD is the most important national security and defense issue for the United States, as far

into the future as we can see. Because it's such an important problem, and such a complex problem, it requires a multifaceted approach. There is no single silver bullet. Because the risk is so great from WMD, we need to be deploying all of our instruments, and not suggesting that any one of them—arms control, or preemption, or missile defenses, or any other single tool—is going to make us safe. The DoD introduced the "8 Ds" in the early 1990s, when I was there. These describe the full panoply of counterproliferation tools: dissuasion, disarmament, diplomacy, denial, defusing, deterrence, defenses...and the last one is destruction, which is preemption.

FORUM: You've said that we can stop nukes by denying fissile material to non-state actors (NSAs). What about something like bio-terror?

CARTER: The bio-terror situation is entirely different from the nuclear terror situation. But there are also steps we can take that will dramatically increase our level of protection, just as securing fissile material will essentially eliminate the threat of nuclear terrorism. In the bio area, there is no ingredient of bio-terror that you can contain the way you can imagine containing fissile material. Therefore, there is very little hope of getting meaningful protection on the front end of the bio-weaponeering process. However, bio-weapons, unlike nuclear weapons, don't kill in an instant. There is a precious period of time between the attack or the first infected individual, and the development of an epidemic. That time is not present in the flash of a nuclear weapon, but it is present in bio-terror. In that period of time, by using vaccination, by using quarantine, by using antiviral and antibiotic medica-

tion, you can turn an attempt at mass bio-terrorism into a fizzle. That is a public health objective we should have, and an objective we can aspire to. I think that the next President, by the time he leaves office, ought to be able to say to the American people with confidence, that at least with regard to anthrax and smallpox, there is no possibility that they can be used as WMD against the American population.

FORUM: The U.S. struck Iraq preemptively, citing evidence of WMD, which were never found. What caliber of intelligence do you think we need to have to justify a preemptive military strike? In which circumstances is that type of strike acceptable?

CARTER: Well, I believe that the WMD were the right reason for the invasion of Iraq, and I also believed that in the aftermath of the war, we would find and produce for the world the evidence that would vindicate our action. It turned out that our intelligence was incorrect, and that suggests that WMD make very difficult intelligence targets. They are by their nature

small in scale and can be run by relatively small and compact groups. This is different from traditional military threats. Large armies are by their nature large, and they exercise, and train, and recruit, and do all kinds of other things that give intelligence clues. WMD programs are much more difficult to penetrate, and one of the issues for our time is whether the intelligence basis needed for any set of policy tools—preemption or arms control—will be there, or whether we will be operating in substantial ignorance of the facts and will just have to make the best of the situation.

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FORUM: What effect do you think that intelligence failure will have on the U.S.'s ability to marshal support for preemption in the future?

CARTER: Well, it's unfortunate that the first example of this—of the use of preemption—proved to be based on faulty intelligence. Some around the world have even gone so far as to suggest that our intelligence about North Korea is comparably flawed, which is just not true. We've been to Yongbyon. We know there were 8,000 fuel rods there; there is no doubt about it. Those fuel rods are now being reprocessed into plutonium.

FORUM: What can we do to reassure the international community that U.S. intelligence is good in the future?

CARTER: It'll always be important to keep sensitive information secret, before military operations are taken. The best you can hope for in the future, if there are other circumstances like this, is that intelligence will prove to be correct, and that

after we take action, we can show the world that we did the right thing, even if they're not willing to believe us beforehand.

FORUM: You recently called Iran and North Korea the world's two most pressing nuclear proliferation threats. With regard to each of these cases, what steps do you think the U.S. should take to ensure its own security?

CARTER: The two cases are very different, but share one common feature, which is that letting either one of them go nuclear is so damaging to U.S. security that we have to be willing to run great risks and pay great sacrifices to make sure that doesn't happen.

FORUM: What incentives can we offer these countries to desist?

CARTER: It's not clear what mixture of threats and inducements will work in either case, or even whether diplomacy of this kind is possible at all. You won't find that out unless you make an effort, but you need to be prepared for the possibility that diplomacy will fail and more coercive approaches will be needed. ■