

The “Ahmadinejad effect” and “pre-emptive” duties and rights

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Abstract

Globalization has made possible the *Ahmadinejad effect*, where minor actors on the world stage can rise to prominence and solidify their power base at home by posing realistic threats to the security of even distant lands. The case of Ahmadinejad, as with Saddam Hussein before, raises the issue of *pre-emptive duties* (and rights), what is owed to others toward upholding rights that could be threatened sometime in the future. Pre-emptive duties and rights are given importance based on psychological assumptions about how people would behave *if certain conditions were to come about*. For example, checks and balances in the United States constitution are intended to prevent the concentration of power, on the assumption, supported by recent psychological research, that “power corrupts.” The concentration of power in the United States at the global level, and in the executive branch of the American government during the presidency of George W. Bush, seems to reflect this demonstrated tendency.

Keywords

Ahmadinejad effect, corruption, power, pre-emptive duties, pre-emptive rights

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad marked Israel’s 60th anniversary by calling the Jewish state a “stinking corpse” that will soon disappear. (<http://www.cbn.com/CBNnews/372385.aspx>, retrieved Aug 21, 2008)

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Local and national leaders have throughout history made threats against other states, but *globalization*, the increasing integration and inter-dependency of societies, allied with the greater power of new technologies and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, has dramatically raised the possibility that such threats could and will be carried out. Until recently in human history, major world powers did not feel directly threatened by radical groups in distant lands; for example, during the 19th century Great Britain was concerned with events in Afghanistan mainly for strategic reasons but did not feel directly threatened by any group in Afghanistan. The tragedy of 9/11 highlights the point that the United States, the world's sole superpower at the start of the 21st century, is now directly concerned with the activities of radicals in Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, and other "remote," economically and militarily weak countries. In this era of inter-connected security, the possible development of weapons of mass destruction by radicals in distant lands has given rise to the *Ahmadinejad effect*, where minor actors on the world stage can rise to prominence and solidify their power base at home by posing realistic threats to the security of even distant lands (Moghaddam, 2010, p. 12). The possibility of Iran possessing weapons of mass destruction means that threats made by Iranian leaders to "wipe out" other nations *have* to be taken seriously.

Reactions to threats made by Ahmadinejad provide important lessons for students of rights and duties, suggesting an addition to the types of rights and duties discussed by Passini. To better understand this addition, it is useful to return to the "pre-emptive" invasion of Iraq in 2003, spearheaded by the United States during the presidency of George W. Bush. The basic logic of the "pre-emptive strike" was that:

The regime of Saddam Hussein has already demonstrated it will use weapons of mass destruction; the gassing of Iraqi Kurds after the first Gulf War demonstrates this.

The regime of Saddam Hussein has amassed weapons of mass destruction and is adding to its arsenal.

The regime of Saddam Hussein and "their terrorist allies" are part of an "axis of evil" that threatens world peace.

We have a duty to take pre-emptive action against Saddam Hussein's regime.

Most of the heated criticism following the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq has been on the (intentional or unintentional) inaccuracy of the claim that Saddam Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction, but my focus here is on the wider implications of the argument for the psychology of rights and duties. In particular, I propose that the arguments used by the George W. Bush administration concern *pre-emptive duties*, what is owed to others toward supporting rights that could be threatened sometime in the future. In this case, the Bush administration assumed it was duty-bound to Americans and the "free world" to prevent Saddam Hussein from sometime in the future using weapons of mass destruction (which Saddam Hussein was supposed to possess) to threaten the right of the "free world" to live in peace.

Pre-emptive duties are based on psychological assumptions about a target person and group. It is well known that Pakistan and Israel have weapons of mass

destruction, but the George W. Bush administration did not see them as a threat. Saddam Hussein and his regime were assumed to be aggressive, deceitful, and likely to threaten world peace sometime in the future. The implication, then, is that some leaders and regimes have a right to be in possession of weapons of mass destruction and we do not have a duty to deny them this right; other leaders and regimes do not have a right to be in possession of weapons of mass destruction and we have a pre-emptive duty to deny them the opportunity to try to exercise this right.

Of course, a pre-emptive duty can in some circumstances be interpreted as a pre-emptive right. For example, underlying the George W. Bush administration's case for launching the 2003 "Iraq war" ("invasion") was the proposition that United Nations resolutions had given the United States this "right" (a "right" denied by international jurists, such as Bingham, 2010). To rephrase the Bush argument in terms of rights: as leaders of the free world, we have a right to launch a pre-emptive attack because Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction that he could use sometime in the future to threaten the peace of the free world.

Power and pre-emptive duties and rights

There are numerous other examples where pre-emptive duties and rights are given importance, based on psychological assumptions about how people would behave *if certain conditions were to come about*. One important domain in which this takes place is that of power relations; consider, for example, the case of the "separation of powers" in major democracies (Boix & Stokes, 2007). Considerable care is taken in democracies to ensure that there are clearly defined domains for the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government, and that no branch trespasses on the territory of the other(s). At the same time, each branch serves as a check on the "over-reach" of other branches. Underlying the separation of powers is the psychological assumption that "power corrupts": if an individual or group comes to have unchecked power, this will result in corruption and the misuse of power.

Does power corrupt? This is a question about the psychological characteristics of humans under certain conditions: when they have power and when they lack power. A series of studies conducted by Lammers and his associates suggest that, at least in the Western context, greater power does result in behavior that is less ethical, and even hypocritical (Lammers & Stapel, 2009; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). Given that those who both enjoy power and believe they do so legitimately tend to be more assertive (following Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008), leaders convinced of their own legitimacy ("I am a man of the people," "God chose me," and so on) probably have a greater tendency to become corrupt as a result of absolute power.

The research of Lammers and his associates provides evidence for the necessity and importance of the pre-emptive duty to prevent the concentration of power unchecked by other powers. This research is concerned with power at the interpersonal level in a laboratory context, whereas in the world outside the laboratory the concern is more often about group power: whites relative to blacks; men

relative to women; the economically rich relative to the poor; the northern hemisphere relative to the southern hemisphere; management relative to labor, and so on. The question becomes: does power corrupt at the level of groups, such as nation states?

A strong argument can be made that just as power can corrupt at the level of individuals (Lammers, & Stapel, 2009; Lammers et al., 2010), power can also corrupt at the level of groups, such as nation states. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has enjoyed the status of the sole superpower of the world. This “power monopoly” at the level of nation states coincided with a number of events that resulted in a greater concentration of power in the person of the American president. First, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 resulted in an increased perception of outgroup threat and a greater “rallying around the flag” by the American population, as reflected by an upward jump in approval ratings for the US President immediately after 9/11 (see Moghaddam, 2008, pp. 54–58, for a discussion of psychological processes associated with these trends). Second, President George W. Bush took the opportunity created by the post 9/11 “rallying around the flag” to act more assertively and, according to some (Pfiffner, 2008), to extend the power of the presidency.

Thus, not only was the United States extending its power globally, but the sitting American President was extending the power of the White House. The “overreach” of President Bush after 9/11 within the United States beyond what is permitted by the US constitution (Pfiffner, 2008), and the “overreach” of the United States on the world stage beyond the legal mandate provided by the United Nations (Bingham, 2010), may reflect this general tendency for power to corrupt under conditions in which it is not sufficiently constrained by checks and balances.

Concluding comment

The “Ahmadinejad effect” once again forces us to confront the issue of pre-emptive duties and rights in frightening circumstances on the world stage, this time under a Democratic president, Barack Obama. Once again, various American commentators are arguing that the United States President has a pre-emptive duty to take action (e.g., stricter sanctions, military air strikes) against a foreign sovereign state (the Islamic Republic of Iran) because of what the leadership of that country could do in the future. The case of Iran is different from Iraq, in part because Iraq was presented by the George W. Bush administration as already having weapons of mass destruction, whereas the Obama administration is presenting Iran as being in the process of acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, the same images of “the smoking gun” and “the mushroom cloud” are being used, and the same pre-emptive duties and rights are being cited. To students of culture and behavior, this situation suggests that the power of the context tends to overwhelm the individual in the White House so that the same pre-emptive duties and rights come to the forefront. The vitally important role of pre-emptive duties and rights suggests the need for greater research attention to this topic.

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