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U.S. Strategy for the War on Terrorism

By Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith, Political Union University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, Wednesday, April 14, 2004.

I'm glad to have been invited to speak here at one of America's great universities. I've been asked to talk about the war on terrorism and some of the ideas underlying our strategy for the war.

The September 11 attack

The 9/11 attack was an event so terrible and significant – so damaging and threatening – that it required us to reexamine a long list of national security concerns.

Officials had for years been thinking about:

- terrorism,
- defense policy in the post-Cold-War world,
- the spread of weapons of mass destruction and
- problem states such as Iraq, Iran, Libya and North Korea.

9/11 compelled U.S. officials to reexamine all such matters in light of the terrorists' audacity, ambition and hatred – and in light of our own vulnerabilities and our responsibility to protect the lives and freedom of the American people. 9/11 showed that threats hitherto belittled as wild speculations or hypothetical dangers of the remotest possibility are realistic, indeed actual.

Before 9/11, terrorism was commonly viewed as political – an action intended to influence or persuade. Many discussed terrorism as a form of “political theater,” a way that terrorist groups used shocking actions to call attention – sympathetic attention – to a cause. According to that view, the terrorists, adhering to Machiavelli's dictum that it's better to be feared than loved, nonetheless still wished to avoid being hated.

But that view could hardly explain 9/11. The terrorists who killed 3000 ordinary people at the World Trade Center, where ten times that number worked on a daily basis, would have been pleased to have killed them all – or many times more than that, if they had had the means to do so.

Al Qaida and other terrorists targeting the United States are engaged in more than “political theater.” What are their goals and calculations? There are various possibilities – for example:

- The calculation of gain and loss by the suicide bombers is not limited to this world; they act to obtain benefits in the next world.

- Some of the terrorists appear to be nihilists, driven by a desire for destruction and death for their own sakes.
- And some seem to believe that they can achieve victory over us, not by gaining political support, but by pulverizing their enemy – demoralizing us, destroying our unity and sense of purpose, ultimately collapsing our political order – to the point that we could no longer resist them.

In short, we must deal with the idea that we are at war with terrorists who think that they can use terrorism not to extract some political concession from us, but to defeat us completely. Such a goal may seem to us fantastic or preposterous – but it may seem achievable to those who credit the Soviet Union’s collapse to their own resistance in Afghanistan, not to mention as a manifestation of divine favor for themselves.

Window into administration thinking

I’d like to give you something of a window into the Administration’s thinking in the days just after 9/11. The first thought of top policy makers was what can be done to prevent the next attack?

As you recall, steps were taken immediately to shut down air traffic and to tighten border control. You will recall also that soon after 9/11 came the anthrax attacks on some news media offices and U. S. Senate offices. Steps were taken immediately to quarantine and inspect mail and to hold up delivery of packages. To this day, we do not know who made those attacks or who provided the anthrax.

Terrorism as crime, terrorism as war

The President’s most basic decision after 9/11 was how to think about the attack.

Keep in mind that for years Americans were hit by terrorists. There were hijackings, murders and bombings. In the 1990s, Americans died and were injured in the:

- first World Trade Center bombing,
- bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia,
- destruction of our East Africa embassies and
- bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen.

The U.S. government’s response in those cases was to use the FBI to investigate. Our government was looking for individuals to arrest, extradite and prosecute in criminal courts.

President Bush broke with that practice – and with that frame of mind – when he decided that 9/11 meant that we are at war. He decided that the US would respond not with the FBI and U.S. attorneys, but with our armed forces and every instrument of U.S. national power.

That was a momentous decision. I believed it showed a proper comprehension of the problem. It looks obvious in retrospect, but that’s often the case with grand insights. At the time the President decided to respond to 9/11 by going to war, he was departing radically and boldly from many years of a different policy.

What does it mean to be at war?

Once the President announced that the United States is at war, the key questions for policy makers were:

- How do we define the enemy?

- What is our war aim?
- What should be our strategy?

The enemy

First, who is the enemy?

The enemy is *not* a state or group of states; it's not a traditional type of enemy we have faced in war. The enemy is not a discrete, hierarchical organization either. Rather, the enemy is a far-flung network of terrorist organizations and their state and non-state sponsors.

Terrorist organizations rely on state sponsors for safe haven, funds, weapons and other types of support. We cannot win the war on terrorism if we do not cut off state support for terrorist organizations.

What is our war aim?

Which brings us to our second question: What does it mean to “win” the war on terrorism? How do we define our war aim?

Setting a war aim is an important task. We recalled that in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the United States set its war aim as the liberation of Kuwait. We built our coalition on that formulation. In the Spring of 1991, after Iraqi forces were expelled from Kuwait, that war aim proved a decisive constraint on further action.

In September 2001, after 9/11, the President and his team devoted a great deal of brainpower to getting the war aim right. We didn't want to set an unrealistic, unachievable aim, such as “eliminate terrorism.” We couldn't honestly promise the American people that our government can prevent all future terrorist attacks.

The most basic national security responsibility of U.S. officials is to protect not just the lives but the liberty of the American people. If terrorism causes Americans not to fly, not to open our letters and packages, to shut our borders and to abandon wholesale our civil liberties, then the United States will have been defeated in this war.

So, after all the deliberation, President Bush set our war aim as: Defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life as a free and open society. This sounds simple enough, but it is a weighty and pregnant formulation.

A strategy of offense

Aiming to defeat terrorism as a threat to our freedom — to our way of life as a free and open society — means that we cannot rely solely or even primarily on a defensive strategy. If we tried to do so, we would have to clamp down drastically across America, intruding grossly on the privacy rights and other civil liberties of Americans. As terrorist attacks occurred, US officials would continually be under pressure to move toward police state tactics — to sacrifice our freedom and change our way of life.

The alternative to that bad option is a strategy *not* of trying to defeat terrorists on American soil, but striking them abroad where they do so much of their recruiting, training, equipping and planning. Given that our aim is to preserve our society's liberties, we have no alternative to a strategy of offense.

In other words, we concluded that, in dealing with the terrorists, we had either to change the way *we* live, or change the way *they* live.

The WMD/ terrorism/state support nexus

Another essential part of our thinking about a proper strategy for the war on terrorism is the danger of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in terrorist hands. As I've noted, officials and defense analysts for years before 9/11 were attuned to the risks of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But 9/11 gave the problem greatly intensified urgency.

The terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center would gleefully have killed ten, a hundred or a thousand times the number of victims on 9/11 if they could have — if they had had access, for example, to biological or nuclear weapons. It's a significant coincidence that the list of key state sponsors of terrorism overlaps so extensively with the list of problem states that are pursuing WMD capabilities.

This is why President Bush, Secretary Rumsfeld and others in our government have, since 9/11, been explaining that the main strategic threat in the war on terrorism is the nexus among:

- Terrorist organizations;
- Their state sponsors; and
- Weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. strategy in the war on terrorism

The U.S. strategy in the war on terrorism is to organize and help lead international efforts to deny terrorist groups systematically what they need to operate and survive, including:

- safe havens,
- leadership,
- finances,
- weapons (especially WMD),
- ideological support and
- access to targets.

We think of our actions in the war on terrorism as falling into three categories (which are useful though not entirely distinct):

1. Disrupting and attacking terrorist networks;
2. Protecting the homeland; and
3. Countering ideological support for terrorism. (Battle of Ideas)

Countering ideological support for terrorism

Let me say a word about this third category of actions — which is sometimes referred to as the battle of ideas.

The war on terrorism will never end if all we do is disrupt and attack terrorist networks, because while we are doing so, new terrorists are being recruited and indoctrinated — probably faster than anyone on our side can capture or kill them. If we're going to avoid placing ourselves on an ever-accelerating treadmill, our strategy must aim to stem the flow of people into the ranks of the terrorists. Doing this requires a focus on the widespread ideological support for terrorism.

Changing the way millions of people think about something is a difficult task, but history knows examples of successful campaigns to do so.

- In the 20th century, fascism and Nazism were discredited with the defeat of the Axis powers.

- And, in a fifty year struggle culminating in the collapse of the Soviet empire, communist totalitarianism lost much of its following.
- In the 19th century, another 50-years campaign, led by Britain and the Royal Navy, changed the way the world thinks about the slave trade.

As President Bush has said, the world should view terrorism as it views the slave trade, piracy on the high seas and genocide — activities that no respectable person condones, much less supports.

To succeed in this crucial third element – the ideological element – of our strategy in the war on terrorism, we are working to:

- De-legitimate terrorism; and
- Support the success of models of moderation, especially in the Moslem world.

The ideological struggle within the war on terrorism is in large part a civil war between extremists and their opponents in the Moslem world. In the war on terrorism, the US is not fighting the world of Islam. On the contrary, we are allied with the many millions of Moslems who do not want to be dominated by the kind of extremists who follow Usama bin Laden. Democratic reform and the success of democratic institutions in the Arab world and the Moslem world generally are essential parts of the strategy to defeat terrorism as a threat to our own freedom.

Implementing the strategy

The United States and its coalition partners have been implementing this war on terrorism strategy for two and a half years.

- We've done so by ousting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and supporting the new Afghan government.
- We've done so by training local forces around the world to do counter-terrorist operations – in the Philippines, Yemen, Colombia, the former Soviet republic of Georgia and elsewhere.
- We've done so through international cooperation on law enforcement, intelligence, interdiction of terrorist finances and maritime interdiction operations in the Mediterranean, off the Horn of Africa, in the Pacific and elsewhere.
- We've done so by capturing or killing terrorist leaders and key operatives, including two-thirds of the known leadership of al Qaida.
- We've done so by liberating Iraq from the Saddam Hussein regime and working to launch the Iraqis on the path to freedom.
- And we've done so by inducing the Libyan government to declare, dismantle and abandon its WMD programs and stockpiles.

I hope this review of the War on Terrorism strategy helps you see how our difficult tasks in Iraq fit with that strategy.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

As President Bush explained in his April 13 press conference, our stakes in success in Iraq are large. Operation Iraqi Freedom has so far:

- Eliminated a safe haven for terrorists like Abu Nidal, Abu Abbas, Zarqawi and others.
- Eliminated a source of financial and other types of support for terrorists – recall that Saddam encouraged Palestinian suicide bombings by offering to pay \$25,000 to the murderers’ families.
- Eliminated a possible source of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons technology, materiel or training for terrorists. (By the way, this point is not negated by our not yet having found Iraqi stockpiles of WMD or the possibility that Saddam secretly destroyed all the stockpiles before the war.)

Much work remains to be done to extend basic security throughout Iraq and lay the foundation for stability, freedom and prosperity.

As President Bush remarked, we’ve had a rough week or two in Iraq. Our losses weigh heavily. But there is no cost-free option for America in Iraq.

The mission there is as important as it is complex and dangerous. The Coalition force and the CPA have the steady leadership required to make the transition to Iraqi sovereign authority this summer and to help the new Iraqi government implement the admirable interim constitution developed by the Iraqi Governing Council. But we don’t underestimate the difficulty of the work to be done in Iraq.

Our forces

Likewise, much work remains to be done in the war on terrorism outside Iraq. In this war, there are continual accomplishments, but also setbacks. There is great determination among the United States and its coalition partners, but the enemy is also intensely determined and capable of exploiting the vulnerabilities that inhere in the free and open nature of our societies.

I want to pay tribute to the tenacity, creativity, courage and willingness to sacrifice of the Coalition forces fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the war on terrorism – and especially to the US forces, who are responsible for so much of the effort.

Among our forces, there’s a phrase that has become common as a byword: “Failure is not an option.” Those forces give us protection, insight and inspiration. Failure is not an option.



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