

## COVER STORY

# Is America At War?

The persistent warnings of President George W. Bush that the United States is in a real war against terrorism have lost much of their impact as both well-meaning friends and his political adversaries have behaved as if the president's top priority were not to win the war.

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

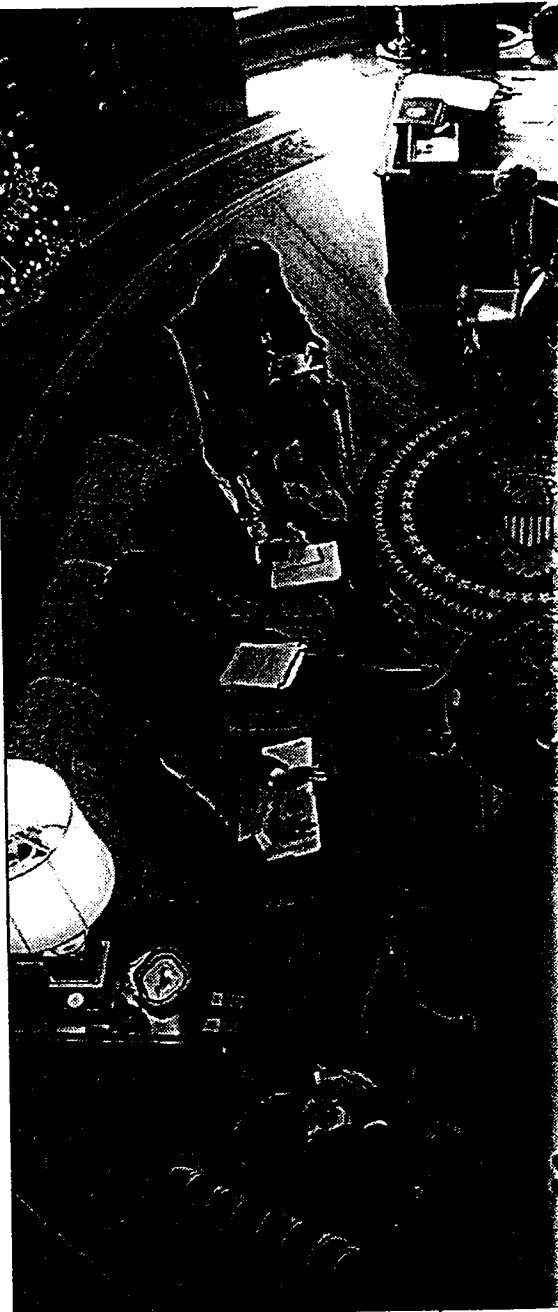
**A** subterranean river of leaks has undermined the war on terrorism and subverted contingency plans for replacing the brutal regime in Iraq, according to U.S. intelligence sources. They warn that this is just the beginning of ongoing efforts, some coordinated and some not, to subvert the administration of George W. Bush. And, say insiders, it is being made worse by White House political handlers who have been doing their best to distract public attention from the president's tough and repeated warnings that the country is at war. A deliberately cultivated atmosphere of normalcy has diluted the president's message, stripping his consistent pronouncements of their urgency.

The White House political and public-liasion staffs have failed to mobilize the president's grass-roots allies and constituent groups for the long, grueling fight ahead, say concerned friends of Bush. Poor White House relations

with Congress meanwhile have allowed moderate Republicans and liberal Democrats to question the president's Iraq agenda, say House staffers, and failed to fortify conservatives who could act as surrogates for Bush on Capitol Hill and across the country. Fewer and fewer people can say with a straight face that the United States is at war.

The intelligence services may be working overtime, the armed forces stretched to their limits at levels of intensity sometimes not seen since World War II, and the Department of Justice (DOJ) and new homeland-security structures operating harder than ever to keep the public safe on the home front. But, despite all that Bush and his Pentagon team under Donald Rumsfeld can do, is the U.S. government really on a war footing?

"We're not appropriately at war by any historical standard," says foreign-policy historian John Tierney, a professor at the Institute of World Politics. In Tierney's view, it's a mistake for



**Strategy session:** The president hosts a meeting in the Oval Office with members of his homeland-security team and other White House staff.

national leaders to pretend that all is normal despite the military operations against terrorists and what the president warns will be a "war" lasting years or even generations. "If you want to call today's situation normal, then you cannot be in a war. 'Normal' at home by definition means that you're not at war. War is a profound interruption of daily life," Tierney says.

Meanwhile, White House insiders tell *INSIGHT*, political elements of the administration increasingly are perceived as catering to a carping, whining activist community that feels offended by what widely are regarded as legitimate security measures. Other



PAUL MORSE/UP

senior administration officials confide that they are infuriated with the White House for ordering homeland-security chief Tom Ridge, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, FBI Director Robert Mueller and others to cater to the complaints of small but loud Muslim and Arab activist groups, which they say have invested their energy carping about how they have become "victims" of government abuse, racism and bigotry. "Who's making us do this?" demands an angry senior presidential national-security appointee.

Tierney says the very word "war" has become a cartoon. "Americans have cheapened the term," he says. "War on drugs, 'war of the sexes,' gang wars, 'war on poverty' It's more than a semantic issue; it's a substantive one. Words that are used without any precise meaning lose their impact and power to compel. So polemicists say we're not at war since the president has not mobilized the people or even called for national sacrifice."

This isn't to say that the White House hasn't asked its natural constituencies for help. "President Bush put out a call some months ago for people and organizations nationwide to participate in the homeland-defense effort," says Jerry Newberry, spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). "He's talked to various groups and people all around the country asking them to contribute in various ways. The VFW did meet with a member of the White House staff some months ago and, in fact, we volunteered our services in whatever way we could. We, like many other organizations, encouraged our

**Geared up:** U.S. soldiers return to base after a battle in Afghanistan.

posts to do various things in the community — make contact with emergency providers, make ourselves available in emergency situations and make our posts available in case of natural disasters, that type of thing."

But did the White House staff mobilize such groups to build support and public awareness about the war on terrorism? No, Newberry says. "We had already made the White House aware that we were in support of their efforts and that we would do everything we could to offer our assistance in any way. When the president came out and asked for the commitment of volunteer hours, our people went to the White House, met with the director of the Freedom Corps and put together a plan of action."

Bush announced creation of the USA Freedom Corps in January to help communities "prepare for and prevent crises and strengthen our homeland security," according to a White House fact sheet. But nothing of substance has been done to enlist the public in the broader war against terrorism, which would include support for the politically difficult defense transformation under way at the Pentagon.

Nor has the White House staff invited nongovernmental defense groups to act as surrogates, as was done in the Reagan years, to keep pro-defense leaders and organizations informed, mobilized and motivated. It appears to have ignored the successful Reagan formula, where presidential leadership was supported by an issues-savvy White House staff committed to carrying out the president's defense vision, by White House-directed coordination between and among government agencies, by providing a steady flow of information to make the president's case in a way the public readily could understand and by credentialing and empowering the president's supporters in Washington and in grass-roots America [see "Winning Page from Reagan Playbook," Aug. 20, 2001].

"During World War II, when people would hiss and piss about not being able to do something, the answer always was, 'Don't you know there's a war on?' Well, we don't know there's a war on," says Herbert Romerstein, a veteran congressional investigator and historian of political communication. But apparently key elements of the White House staff didn't get the message. After the president's State of the Union address, in which he emphasized the fight against terrorism as his top priority, the White House Office of Public Liaison issued talking points that placed *entitlement programs* on the top of the list and pointedly de-emphasized the pres-



JIM HOLLANDER/REUTERS

ident's war aims. White House public-liaison activity with defense groups continues to be alternately described as "limp," "weak," "nonexistent" and "useless," according to senior nongovernmental defense operatives who asked not to be cited so as to maintain what tenuous relationships they have.

But the White House political office eagerly has courted Muslim organizations — throwing Bush's "with-us-or-with-the-terrorists" dictum to the wind and ignoring the fact that some of these groups have been favorable to terrorism in what is being euphemized as a well-intentioned but misguided outreach program, say concerned White House insiders. Critics among the president's friends tell *INSIGHT* the administration has been burned time and again by embracing American Muslim activists who turn out to be supporters of Hamas or Hezbollah, some of whom can't even bring themselves to denounce al-Qaeda by name. The critics say they fear some liberal enemy of the president, such as the *Washington Post*, will put it all together just before the election.

These same critics note the exclusion of mainstream Muslims who openly preach nonviolence and who have offered repeatedly to help antiterrorism agents root subversive operatives from mosques across the United States. One of those Muslim leaders, Sheikh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, who heads the Supreme Islamic Council of America, loyally warned both the Clinton administration and the current White House that they were getting mixed up with some real rascals. "I'm sad because when I spoke up in 1999, they didn't listen," Kabbani told the *Detroit News* last October. "And to the extent that the extremists are everywhere — in the administration, on Capitol Hill — they didn't do their homework."



MICHAEL KLEINFELD/UP

**Final warning:** Secretary Rumsfeld finally has lost his patience for those leaking information from inside.

Has there been a change? Despite security concerns expressed widely among the president's top intelligence specialists, the political specialists have had their way. Before leaving for Uzbekistan recently, Kabbani told *INSIGHT*, "The White House needs to do its homework."

Bush backers say the White House needs to do better with Congress, too. "Has anyone noticed there is not a single conservative member of Congress taking a leadership role in the fight over Iraq policy?" asks a frustrated senior Republican Senate staffer. Liberal "[Sens.] Lugar [of Indiana], Biden [of Delaware], Levin [of Michigan], Hagel [of Nebraska] and Lieberman [of Connecticut] have stolen the show, with Lieberman being the only hawk. Why? Why are conservatives MIA, the con-

servative critics ask, when our guys at DOD [Department of Defense] are fighting State and the apparat tooth and nail? Why aren't our friends in the administration begging for help?" In a reference to the Senate GOP leadership, the staffer adds, "Why aren't we offering it to them?"

Officials opposed to an assertive antiterrorism policy are leaking secrets to the liberal "prestige press" that editorially opposes the president, say high-level Pentagon brass. A flag-rank officer grunts, "Can it be they neither realize nor care that by leaking super-sensitive intelligence reports and highly classified war plans they are tipping off present and potential enemies of the United States like al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein? These b\*\*\*\*\*s know what they are doing and they do it anyway!" A civilian DOD expert warns: "Entire intelligence programs have been compromised, missions doomed to failure and the lives of American service personnel placed needlessly at risk, both in the present worldwide campaign against terrorists and an anticipated final showdown with Saddam Hussein."

Romerstein says, "The nature of national-security leaks has changed. During the Clinton days, such leaks usually were from otherwise patriotic Americans who were worried about cover-ups of real threats and malfeasance. But the leaks of today are designed to undermine American policy, to harm our fight against Iraq and against terrorism. They are more like during the Sandinista campaigns [of the 1980s] when people on the left wanted to stop Reagan from fighting the communists in Central America. They were calculated to damage our war against the enemy; they contained untruths.

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## American Muslim Council 'Repays' FBI Favor

FBI Director Robert Mueller's June 28 speech to the American Muslim Council (AMC) is coming back to bite him. Reportedly pressured to speak there under White House orders, Mueller gave the militant group the political cover it needed to counter concern that some of its leaders support terrorists.

A month later, the AMC repaid the favor by announcing a lawsuit against the FBI because agents had questioned the group's treasurer, Mohammad Ali Khan, as he tried to board a Northwest Airlines flight in Las Vegas. Khan told reporters

he was questioned about possible terrorist connections, and that such a practice is racist and bigoted.

His lawyer, Stanley Cohen, called Khan an example of the American Dream. Khan stoutly denounced the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. However, when given the chance he didn't distance himself from other terrorist causes.

One of the questioners asked Khan how he felt about the fact that his lawyer also was an attorney for a leader of Hamas, which the State Department classifies as a terrorist organization.

Khan brushed it off, saying: "The only Hamas I know of is the hummus in a Middle Eastern restaurant. A dish. Okay?" Khan called Cohen "a civil-rights advocate."

But Cohen's law-office suite mate, Lynne Stewart, is under federal prosecution for allegedly helping her client, 1993 World Trade Center bombing mastermind Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman, deliver clandestine messages to his terrorist cadres in Egypt [see "Lefty Lawyer Indicted in Bizarre Jihad Case," May 6]. Cohen himself has said on several occasions that he might represent Osama bin Laden if he is captured.

—JMW

## IS AMERICA AT WAR?

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You could tell many of them came from the [congressional] committees. There's always enough spin to undermine the United States."

Tierney says, "Loose lips sink ships' was an old wartime slogan to guard against careless casual conversation among factory workers, dockhands and family members of servicemen — not against government officials leaking classified material."

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld has been warning publicly about leaks since the war began last October. He is a tough man, but until very recently he made no move to seek out, fire or press charges against those inside government leaking information. Now, after the *New York Times* and other papers published details of an apparent war plan against Iraq, Rumsfeld means to deal ruthlessly with the leakers, even if it means throwing some government officials in jail.

Rumsfeld says quietly that the country can do better, and nobody has been more energetic than he in articulating the state of war. Seething that the military wasn't killing the terrorist enemy fast enough, he called in late July for more-aggressive operations against terrorist units in third countries. Word is that he has to badger the Pentagon bureaucracy, both civilian and uniformed, to keep them focused on the fact that America is fighting a real war. "It's no secret to you all, to all of us, the secretary wants everyone to understand the sense of urgency about what we're doing here, and the threats out there are very, very real," said Pentagon spokeswoman Torie Clarke in a recent meeting with reporters. "So he is always communicating to everyone and to the senior military and civilian leadership the sense of urgency with which they should address all these matters."

But a considerable number of Pentagon personnel still don't understand the wartime situation, according to both civilian and uniformed personnel there. The Armed Forces Press Service says, "Rumsfeld is constantly reminding military and civilian personnel about the urgency of taking the battle to the terrorists." The fact that he has to do that nearly a year after Sept. 11 suggests the depth of the problem he and the president face as they head toward a showdown with Saddam Hussein.

professionals