

Victories in the War Against Terrorism

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

As the U.S. piles up victories on many fronts against terrorism, some Bush officials insist the long-term strategy for the war on terror needs to be bolder.

The United States and its allies are chewing their way through terror networks on every populated continent. On any given day, international terrorists and their leaders are surrendering, being captured or killed. Terrorist commanders from Iraq to Indonesia face life sentences in prison or await execution. Those who remain find their networks in tatters, their funding sources starting to dry up and fewer places to hide.

Things have changed in the two years since 9/11. The terrorists now are the prey, though still a dangerous one.

Some say the United States is being too aggressive in fighting terrorism, citing insensitivity to other cultures abroad and alleged abuses of civil liberties at home. Others, such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, insist that the United States isn't fighting hard enough or creatively enough and has yet to take a strategic approach to a war expected to take years or even decades [see sidebar, p. 28].

The civilized world faces more ugly and painful realities ahead, and the elites aren't getting their customary instant gratification of a quick, tidy victory. Yet despite deep and emotional divisions over the ouster of Saddam Hussein, the Arab-Israeli hostilities, the sheer aggressiveness of the U.S.-led offensive against the world's terrorists and their friends and Washington's inept communication with the rest of the world, the United States still has the support of most of the countries that matter. That's important, Bush-administration officials say, because the toughest part may be yet to come.

President George W. Bush has racked

up an impressive string of victories in a little more than two years. He led an unheard-of Marine invasion and Naval bombardment of landlocked Afghanistan, destroying the terrorist, Wahhabi-backed Taliban regime, tearing up the sanctuaries of al-Qaeda and freeing a grateful people from a Dark Ages nightmare. He commanded an audacious and spectacularly successful invasion of Iraq, breaking records of military history in a campaign that ousted Saddam Hussein and ripped up the totalitarian Ba'athist Party.

While human casualties have been low, the political and diplomatic casual-

ties for the administration have been costly. Sold to the public and the world on legalistic grounds as enforcement of U.N. resolutions, the Iraq war was and is, according to the new White House line, a central front against terrorism.

Still, Iraq has produced major diplomatic successes for the United States. In mid-October, within hours of Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) assailing the Iraq war as a "fraud" built on "lies," the United Nations — including Russia, Syria and even France — voted unanimously, in effect, to ratify U.S. control of Iraq and to recognize the provisional Iraqi governing council in Baghdad.

The United States is far from alone. More than 40 countries are supporting the Iraq operation. Depending on the count, as many as 70 countries are helping the United States either overtly or covertly to wage war on the terrorists, administration officials tell *INSIGHT*. No major terrorist attack has succeeded on U.S. soil since Sept. 11, 2001, and the terrorists have far less freedom to operate as the war goes on around the world. The State Department's annual report on terrorism, released earlier this year, shows a 44 percent drop in attacks by "international terrorists" in 2002 from the previous year and down to its lowest level since 1969 — more than three decades ago.

Even some of the regimes the State Department has designated as state sponsors of terrorism, including Syria and Sudan, have found it necessary to extend varying degrees of cooperation. "Friendly" governments such as Saudi

Fall of Baghdad: Overthrowing Saddam, U.S. troops captured more ground in less time than in all history.



©GORDON TOMASEVIC/REUTERS

Arabia and the Persian Gulf state of Qatar have stopped, as far as can be seen, funding Taliban-like movements that sheltered al-Qaeda. European allies, some supportive of U.S. policy and others openly critical, actively have been working together and with Washington to defund and neutralize terrorist entities. Asian allies, particularly the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand, have put their combat forces to work as well as their police.

Quick actions by the United States and other countries have foiled plans for scores — some say hundreds — of terrorist attacks and have disrupted or destroyed terror networks from Manila to Miami. Even Saudi Arabia and Iran are cracking down at home on al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

"Since Sept. 11, 2001, more than 3,000 al-Qaeda leaders and foot soldiers have been taken into custody around the globe, nearly 200 suspected terrorist associates have been charged with crimes in the U.S. and as many as 100 terrorist attacks or plots have been broken up worldwide," the FBI says in an assess-

ment statement. Some administration officials estimate privately that the United States and its partners have killed thousands of terrorists and trainees. More than half of the senior leadership of al-Qaeda has been captured or killed, according to an official Justice Department estimate.

New laws and legal procedures, especially the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act, have provided the FBI and others with the authority to go after terrorist cells at home much more aggressively — so much so that civil libertarians have joined with terrorist-linked groups to complain. The Treasury Department's March 2002 raids of suspected terrorist financing fronts in Northern Virginia were possible in part because the USA PATRIOT Act had provided additional authority for federal judges to issue search warrants, according to a sealed federal affidavit in support of the raids. *INSIGHT* had obtained a copy of the affidavit, since unsealed [see "Alamoudi and Those Bags of Cash," Oct. 28-Nov. 10].

In February, the FBI arrested the alleged leader of the North American cell

of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist group, also thanks to the USA PATRIOT Act. Sources close to the arrest tell this magazine that the FBI for years had been watching Sami al-Arian, a professor at the University of South Florida and an occasional Washington lobbyist against antiterrorist legislation, but because of quirks in the law could not arrest him until the USA PATRIOT Act provided certain legal authority.

Those new powers include allowing counterterrorist investigators to use decades-old, court-approved legal tools and procedures designed to fight narcotics trafficking and organized crime, increasing information-sharing among agencies, updating statutes to be current with new technologies and levying stiffer penalties not only for the terrorists but for those who aid and abet them. To date more than 150 terrorist suspects in the United States have pleaded guilty or been convicted in federal court. According to the Justice Department, some of them, including six members of a terror cell that was based in Lackawanna, N.Y., are helping authorities.

Tough Questions for America's Terror Warriors

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is not satisfied with the progress of the war on terrorism. He sees deep flaws in the government's long-term strategy, views the current bureaucratic reshuffling as too little too late and has asked his senior military and civilian aides to come up with more bold plans for the long term. In an Oct. 16 memorandum to Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Vice Chairman Gen. Peter Pace, Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith, Rumsfeld spelled out his concerns. He did it in a way that Pentagon officials say is consistent with the secretary's method of asking provocative questions to get people to think. *INSIGHT* has obtained a copy of the memo and excerpts follow:

"The questions I posed to combatant commanders this week were: Are we winning or losing the global war on terror? Is DoD [the Department of Defense] changing fast enough to deal with the new 21st-century security environment? Can a big institution change fast enough? Is the USG [U.S. government] changing fast enough?"

"DoD has been organized, trained and equipped to fight big armies, navies and air forces. It is not possible to change DoD fast enough to successfully fight the global war on terror; an alternative might be to try to fashion a new institution,



ROBERT L. WOLLENBERG/AP

On the offensive: Defense Secretary Rumsfeld insists that the U.S. must take the fight to the terrorists.

either within DoD or elsewhere — one that seamlessly focuses the capabilities of several departments and agencies on this key problem.

"With respect to global terrorism, the record since September 11 seems to be: We are having mixed results with al-Qaeda, although we have put considerable pressure on them — nonetheless, a great many remain at large. ..."

"Are the changes we have and are making too modest and incremental? My impression is that we have not yet made truly bold moves, although we have made many sensible, logical moves in the right direction, but are they enough?"

"Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the *madrassas* [Islamist schools] and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"

"Does the U.S. need to fashion a broad, integrated plan to stop the next generation of terrorists? The U.S. is putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan, but we are putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists. The cost-benefit ratio is against us! Our cost is billions against the terrorists' costs of millions.

"It is pretty clear that the coalition can win in Afghanistan and Iraq in one way or another, but it will be a long, hard slog." — JMW

The post-9/11 war footing has forced the federal government to undertake painful reforms to meet the new terrorist threat. Different security and intelligence services, which at times had been loath to cooperate with one another, have improved their coordination and information-sharing, with tangible results. The feds arrested suspected terrorist Abdullah al-Muhajir, a convict once known as José Padilla, as he plotted to detonate a radiological device or "dirty bomb" designed to spew radioactive fallout in a U.S. city [see "Evidence Points to Dirty-Bomb Plot," p. 36]. Attorney General John Ashcroft said at the time of Padilla's arrest in 2002, "Because of the close cooperation among the FBI, the CIA, Defense Department and other federal agencies, we were able to thwart this terrorist."

Less visible to the public is the most massive national-security transformation of the U.S. government since the aftermath of World War II. The new Department of Homeland Security (DHS), a merger of 22 government agencies under a single coordinating umbrella, is still a work in progress but is symptomatic of a much larger transformation.

One of the antiterrorism roles of DHS is to keep the public informed, demystifying the terrorist threat and helping people understand in simple language, via its *ready.gov* Website and other educational means, what the average citizen can do to protect himself from terrorism. For Rumsfeld and others, however, the transformation of government is too modest and too slow. "My impression is that we have not yet made truly bold moves, although we have made many sensible, logical moves in the right direction," he wrote in a private Oct. 16 memo to aides, "but are they enough?" Even in the Pentagon, where he spearheaded a long-term defense transformation effort before 9/11, progress is slow: "It is not possible to change DoD [Department of Defense] fast enough to successfully fight the global war on terror; an alternative might be to try to fashion a new institution, either within DoD or elsewhere — one that seamlessly focuses the capabilities of several departments and agencies on this key problem."

The FBI, the Treasury Department, DHS and other agencies claim to be making headway against terrorist networks already in place inside the country. They disrupted or uprooted al-Qaeda cells from Oregon to Michigan to New York, arresting nearly two-dozen suspects, and already are landing guilty pleas or convictions. They are making headway against other U.S.-based terrorist networks as well. Larry Mefford,

Terrorist Attacks Foiled Since 9/11

The United States and its allies have thwarted more than 100 terrorist attacks since 9/11. "I feel confident that more than 100 activities on the part of al-Qaeda have been disrupted and interrupted around the world," Attorney General John Ashcroft told reporters in August. "I don't know if I would say they are all al-Qaeda. The network of terror has a changing face and there are different aspects of it and different players." Some of the foiled incidents include:

- Detonation of a radioactive "dirty bomb" inside the United States;
- Attacks on U.S. forces in Bosnia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen;
- Attacks on U.S. and NATO ships in the Strait of Gibraltar;
- Bombing of the U.S. embassies and consulates in France, Italy, Pakistan, Singapore and elsewhere;
- Detroit-based attacks inside Jordan, Turkey and the United States;
- Illegal sale of antiaircraft missiles to al-Qaeda.


— JMW

outgoing FBI assistant director for counterterrorism, told a Senate subcommittee in June, "Islamic Sunni extremism spearheaded by al-Qaeda, but which also includes Hamas and other groups, continues to inflict casualties on innocent people worldwide. Hezbollah and Hamas in particular maintain a sizable presence in the U.S."

According to a Justice Department memorandum: "Hundreds of suspected terrorists have been identified and tracked throughout the United States."

Mefford said, "Since Sept. 11, 2001, the FBI has investigated more than 4,000 terrorist threats to the U.S., and the number of active FBI investigations into potential terrorist activity has quadrupled since 9/11. Working with our partners in local and state law enforcement and with the U.S. intelligence community, we have also disrupted terrorist activities in over 35 instances inside the United States since Sept. 11, 2001. These include both domestic and international terrorism matters and consist of a variety of preventive actions, including arrests, seizure of funds and disruption of terrorist recruiting and training efforts."

With all that activity, the FBI has yet to make the transformation to a strategic terrorism-fighting organization. FBI Director Robert Mueller told a House



Ashcroft: "The network of terror has a changing face and there are different aspects of it and different players."

panel in June that the bureau had to transform its "intelligence effort from tactical to strategic if [it] is to be successful in preventing terrorism and more proactive in countering foreign intelligence adversaries and disrupting and dismantling significant criminal activity." Rumsfeld, in a memo to senior military and Pentagon leaders, appears to agree that the United States as a whole has not taken a strategic approach to fighting terrorism: "The U.S. is putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan, but we are putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists."

Top terrorist-hunters acknowledge that the war will be long and difficult, and there is a lot that the United States simply does not know. "Since our understanding of terrorist groups and the underlying philosophy behind these movements continue to develop," said Mefford, "the FBI's assessment of the overall threat continues to evolve."

As Rumsfeld put it in his Oct. 16 memorandum: "Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror," noting that extremists throughout the world are training new generations of terrorists in *madrassas* (Islamic religious schools). "Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the *madrassas* and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?" And terrorist authorities concur, confirming that Rumsfeld and his people are responding to precisely the right question.

J. MICHAEL WALLER IS A SENIOR WRITER FOR *Insight* MAGAZINE.