SEARCH

OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR POLICY

HOME / ORGANIZATION / CONTACT

OUSD(P) OFFICES

LEADERSHIP

PUBLIC STATEMENTS

RELATED LINKS

SPECIAL REPORTS

The War on Terrorism -- America's War and Israel's War

Speech By Douglas J. Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy,

To American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, April 21, 2002

It's good to have the opportunity once again to address an AIPAC annual conference.

I'd like to talk with you about the war on terrorism -- America's war and Israel's war. I'll take my lead from the current headlines and start with the

Middle East.

Day after day, we read of attacks targeted at Israeli civilians.

The suicide bombers -- or, homicide bombers, as President Bush calls them -- have a political cause. But the systematic killing of ordinary people

going about their lives with their children in shopping malls, on buses, at restaurants -- is not politics. It's not even war. It's deranged ideology in action.

At stake is not just the fate of a particular country, but the fate of all open societies.

The intentional mass murder of civilians, including children, forces us to speak in moral terms about basic ideas -- about good and evil.

President Bush states the case starkly: Terrorism is evil.

The suicide bombers who kill Israelis, like those who attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon last September 11th, are enemies of the idea

of humanity. They may claim to represent a good people or a worthy cause, but they taint the political platforms they embrace. It's immoral to

seek excuses for terrorism and harmful to reward it. So the message of responsible governments should be unwavering: terrorists do not advance

their causes; rather, they lose ground.

The Palestinian people are long suffering. They have profound grievances against many who have done them harm and served them ill throughout the Middle East, and not just in Israel.

The Palestinians have been damaged severely for a century or so by leaders who have time and again made disastrous strategic choices -- from siding with the Nazis in World War II to siding with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, to siding with Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. The question now is: What side are they on in the current global war against terrorism? People always pay a price when their leaders fail them. The Palestinian people have paid, and continue to pay, such a price. It is a tragedy.

Referring to Yasir Arafat, President Bush has said, "He's missed his opportunities, and thereby betrayed the hopes of the people he's supposed to lead. Given his failure, the Israeli government feels it must strike at terrorist networks that are killing its citizens".

President Bush then added, "Yet, Israel must understand that its response to these recent attacks is only a temporary measure. All parties have their own responsibilities. And all parties owe it to their own people to act".

Despite the current fighting, the President still envisions Israel and the Palestinians achieving a peace by mutual consent. He stresses that this will require compromises and "hard choices" regarding territorial and other claims and desires of Israelis and Palestinians. The achievement of a negotiated peace settlement would bring an end to the issues of legitimacy, borders, settlements and occupation.

The President has declared, "We have no illusions about the difficulty of the issues that lie ahead. Yet, our nation's resolve is strong. America is committed to ending this conflict and beginning an era of peace".

Many Palestinians say that their aim is to live dignified lives, in freedom, in peace and prosperity in their own state. That goal could be achieved. The U.S. government supports it. Israeli leaders have for years acknowledged that a Palestinian state will be the ultimate outcome of any negotiated peace. As President Bush noted on April 4th, "Israel has recognized the goal of a Palestinian state. The outlines of a just settlement are clear: two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side, in peace and security".

But that goal grows increasingly remote as terrorism belies and precludes diplomacy -- and darkens the Palestinian people's future.

President Bush has called on Israelis to show"a respect for and concern about the dignity of the Palestinian people who are and will be their neighbors.

It is crucial [the President noted] to distinguish between the terrorists and ordinary Palestinians seeking to provide for their own families".

The Palestinians could help themselves by acknowledging that their worst enemies are those who inspire, finance, equip, excuse and

otherwise encourage children to commit homicide bombings.

The major state supporters of terrorism -- Iraq, Syria and Iran -- offer incentives to encourage such bombings, host terrorist headquarters and supply

the arms and explosives. Clerics, who should be faithful trustees of God's word, violate their trust by legitimating suicide and calling murderers "martyrs."

The cult of suicide and murder is sustained through the education of children to hate and to aspire to become suicide bombers. That cult is fostered

by those who praise terrorists as "heroes" and those who rationalize terrorism as the understandable act of the politically frustrated. This

includes prominent statesmen from many countries who should know better.

The sad reality is that there are politically frustrated people throughout the Middle East and the broader world. Political, religious and other leaders

who craft excuses for terrorism are sowing the wind. It is deadly recklessness.

The United States is fighting terrorism, using the full range of tools at our disposal, military and non-military. We'll continue to confront terrorism on

the military battlefield, but equally importantly on the battlefield of ideas.

Winning the war requires us to help change the way people think. This can be done. Worldwide moral battles can be fought and won. For example,

no decent person any more -- no one who hopes to be recognized as respectable in the wider world -- supports or excuses slave trading, piracy

or genocide. No decent person should support or excuse terrorism either.

Our initial victory in Afghanistan deprived al Qaeda of its safe haven and infrastructure there. We daily learn more about that infrastructure --

its administrative apparatus, training facilities and laboratories in which al Qaeda worked to develop biological and other weapons of mass destruction.

For now, at least, the al Qaeda leadership is on the defensive -- some are in captivity; the rest are on the run.

With a few exceptions, such as Iraq, most countries now wish -- at least they now profess to wish -- to be associated with our global war against terrorism. But at the same time, we see this upsurge in terrorism directed against Israel and brazen public support for anti-Israel terrorism, especially suicide bombings, even from seasoned, sophisticated officials.

Which brings us to the dangers of intellectual as well as military passivity in the face of terrorism.

For three decades or so, the world grew tolerant of terrorism. Many belittled the problem: Recall the famous phrase that commonly passed for sophisticated discourse: "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Some countries supported terrorism -- perhaps not openly, but often without even bothering to cover their tracks. As terrorists racked up a large civilian death toll in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, they and their causes often flourished diplomatically and politically.

The forces of civilized humanity did not take the offensive against terrorism; rarely went after terrorist groups root and branch; failed to coerce the state sponsors of terrorism to stop; never overthrew a regime because it supported terrorism.

But September 11th was a turning point. That attack made it clear that the United States and other open societies required a new approach: We recognized that our countries are too big, too open, too full of high-value targets for us to defend them against terrorists. We had to take the offensive.

The action of US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan has already altered the intellectual atmosphere favorably. Some states that had winked at or even supported terrorism are modifying their policies. In some countries, the policy changes don't necessarily reflect a change of heart. But in others, such as Pakistan, the changes have been dramatic and appear to signify a true strategic redirection.

The United States will stay on the offensive against terrorism -- targeting the terrorists themselves and, where necessary, coercing the states that support or tolerate them. Much of our work in this war is less dramatic than the liberation of Afghanistan. While other actions may once again involve larger-scale US military operations, our current work around the world, including in the Middle East, involves foreign military anti-terrorism

training and international law enforcement, the freezing of bank accounts, intelligence and diplomatic activity and so forth.

Our ultimate goal is to change the international environment regarding terrorism-- instead of tolerance, an international norm of renunciation and repudiation of terrorism. As I said, we want the world to view terrorism as it views piracy, slave trading or genocide -- activities universally repudiated by respectable people. This is not an abstract, philosophical, academic point, but a strategic purpose of great practical significance.

As we continue the US offensive against terrorism, we have in mind not only the more familiar kinds of terrorism.

As horrifying as September 11th was, the anthrax attacks that occurred later --though small in scale -- warned us that terrorists using weapons of mass destruction -- biological agents, or chemical, nuclear or radiological weapons -- are an even greater threat.

When he spoke of state supporters of terrorism that are developing weapons of mass destruction, President Bush said in his State of the Union message that, "they could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic".

Our goal therefore must be, as the President stated, "to prevent regimes that sponsor terrorism from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction".

Also in that speech, President Bush declared, "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons".

So far, I've focused on terrorism as a political tool and the danger that terrorists could acquire weapons of mass destruction.

I'd like to conclude with some thoughts about the sources of terrorism.

It's often argued that the phenomenon of suicide bombers -- terrorists who perform attacks that they know they cannot survive -- demonstrates that we aren't dealing with people who calculate the benefits and costs of their actions.

In this vein, we frequently hear that suicide bombing is the product of the combination of poverty and hopelessness.

Westerners -- we whom Usama bin Laden has sneeringly referred to as "lovers of life" -- cannot easily understand how a young man (or woman) straps on several pounds of high explosive and then blows himself up in a crowd of civilians. We assume that only a person ensnared in deep despair could do such a thing.

This diagnosis implies its own solution -- that the world should address what is called the "root causes of terrorism," the poverty and political hopelessness that many people imagine are the traits and motives of the suicide bombers. This diagnosis, however, doesn't jibe with actual experience. And it blinds us to opportunities we have to confront terrorism strategically.

When we look at the records of the suicide bombers, we see that many aren't drawn from the poor. Mohammed Atta, for instance -- a key figure in executing the September 11 attack -- was a middle-class Egyptian whose parents were able to send him to study abroad. And his education meant that he could look forward to a relatively privileged life in Egypt -- hardly grounds for extreme despair.

Indeed, as we learn from a recent New York Times interview with Hamas leaders in Gaza, what characterizes the suicide bombers -- and especially the old men who send them off on their missions -- is rather hope than despair:

First of all, the bombers cherish a perverse form of religious hope. The promise of eternity in paradise is a tenet of many faiths, a noble incentive and consolation to millions of people. It's as cynical as it is sinister that leaders of al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas and other groups convince young people that eternity in paradise is available as a reward for the murder of innocents.

Second, there is the bomber's hope of earthly glory and reward -- praise as a hero from political leaders and honor for one's parents and a $25,000 check to the bomber's family from Saddam Hussein. President Bush has condemned, "[t]hose governments, like Iraq, that reward parents for the sacrifice of their children "....

Those who encourage homicide bombing, as the President said, "are guilty of soliciting murder of the worst kind".

Third, there is the homicide bomber's political hope. As that New York Times interview makes clear, Palestinian extremists think they have

finally discovered a winning strategy.

The recent outpouring of open support in the Arab world for homicide bombers -- from Mrs. Arafat, from a senior Arab diplomat, from clerics associated with prestigious universities -- reflects excitement at the thought that bombings are producing success. It is the kind of triumphalism characteristic of a mentality that believes in "the worse the better."

This suggests a strategic course for us: attack the sources of these malignant hopes.

Regarding the religious hope: Many Islamic religious leaders seem uncomfortable with suicide bombing -- but many of them have been silenced or intimidated to voice support for the terrorists. The civilized world should exert itself to support moderate clerics, defend them and provide them with platforms to protect their religion from extremists who want to distort and hijack it.

The civilized world should also deal with political leaders who heap honor (and money) on the suicide bombers and their families. President Bush, speaking of suicide bombers, said: "They are not martyrs. They are murderers." Other world leaders have the responsibility to reinforce this message.

Finally, as to the suicide bombers' political hopes, we must ensure that terrorism is not seen as a winning strategy. This is today's immediate challenge: For example, we have to make it understood that the Palestinian homicide bombers are harming, not helping, their political cause.

Peace can be achieved when the conditions are right: and the most important condition is the state of peoples' minds. Thus, we must take seriously the incitement to hatred that creates the intellectual atmosphere in which terrorism can flourish. If we seek the "root cause" of terrorism, this is where we'll find it.

Peace diplomacy in the Middle East has been an intense activity for decades. It's now clear that we have not focused enough attention on the relationship between peace and education. We spend a great deal of attention on what diplomats say to each other. We need to pay closer attention to what teachers instill in their students. Therein lies the key to peace.

causes espoused by the terrorists -- won't be easy. But its importance as a strategic requirement is right up there with the destruction and disruption

of terrorist operational infrastructure.

The Bush administration appreciates the complexity of its tasks -- in the war on terrorism and in Middle East diplomacy. The President approaches

these tasks with the steadiness and energy appropriate to the magnitude of the stakes.

We have our nation and its liberties to protect, our friends to assist, and our adversaries to deter and defeat. This is a rare period of flux in world

affairs. We have opportunities to do good for ourselves and for others -- in the Middle East and other regions of the world -- by enhancing

security, suppressing terrorism, eliminating weapons of mass destruction, promoting freedom and prosperity and opening paths to peace. The

American people expect this administration to rise to the occasion. We shall do our best.

Thank you.