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Under Secretary Feith News Briefing at the Foreign Press Center

Oct 8th FPC Briefing with Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith

Feith: Thank you. Good morning.

The war on terrorism began a year ago. For those of us at the Pentagon and, I'm sure, for many of you, it seems like many years ago. If one measures one's time in emotional energy invested, it's easy to understand why it seems like such a long period of time. It's been very intense.

There's a been a fair amount accomplished over the last year. The Pentagon put together a plan for the war in Afghanistan, organized a coalition and within a matter of weeks of the September 11th attack began the war and within a matter of weeks thereafter ousted the Taliban, vindicating the so-called Bush doctrine that states that harbor terrorists will share the fate of the terrorists. We have deprived al Qaeda of the quiet enjoyment of Afghanistan as a base for its operations.

We prevented a humanitarian disaster. One of the main things on our minds last year at this time were the projections of starvation throughout Afghanistan in the areas in particular that the Taliban wanted to punish, and there was supposed to be widespread starvation. This gave a very high priority in our thinking to the humanitarian operations that our armed forces performed, and it's very gratifying what was accomplished in that area.

...and we, furthermore, helped create conditions for the creation of a broad-based government in Afghanistan. And we had in mind from the beginning of

the war the idea that we were going to liberate, make it clear that we are liberating, not invading. Our strategy was based on a light footprint for U.S. forces, who are working with indigenous Afghan forces interested in ousting the Taliban tyranny.

We wanted to make it clear that we were not approaching this war with an imperialist or colonialist frame of mind, and so we had no thought of acting as if we owned the place. On the other hand, we wanted to make it clear that we had a sense of responsibility and were willing to stay to help create conditions in which Afghanistan could achieve stability and, one hopes, prosperity.

Against al Qaeda in the rest of the world, we put together a strategy that made use of the full range of tools of the U.S. government -- financial, intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic, as well as military.

We are working globally in the war on terrorism, as you know, with activities in Philippines, Yemen, Georgia and elsewhere.

As the new National Security Strategy document that the White House issued makes clear, the war involves two categories of actions. One is the destruction and disruption of terrorist networks, terrorist infrastructure. The second category of action is -- we sometimes refer to as the battle of ideas. And that's the category of actions that addresses the flow into terrorist ranks of new recruits. It is clear to us that if we are going to win the war on terrorism, we are going to have to not only destroy and disrupt current terrorist infrastructure but address this extremely important question of the flow of people into the ranks of the terrorists -- people who believe that it -- that it is legitimate not only to hate so passionately but also to kill innocent people for political purposes, to target them for killing for political purposes. Our goal, as the National Security Strategy makes clear, is to make terrorism -- is to delegitimize terrorism, is to make terrorism like genocide, the slave trade or piracy -- the kinds of activities that no one who aspires to respectability can condone, let alone support.

The strategic focus of the war on terrorism from the very beginning has been the danger that terrorists could obtain weapons of mass destruction. I mean, it was clear from the opening days of the war that we had to address this issue. The list of countries that support terrorists and the list of

dangerous and irresponsible countries that are pursuing chemical weapons, biological weapons and nuclear weapons -- those lists overlap. And the overlap represents a strategic threat of great importance. And we see now with the discussion of Iraq and the danger that the Saddam Hussein regime poses to the world a focus on precisely that nexus between state support for terrorism and the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

And with that, I think I will stop and be happy to take your questions.

Moderator: Let me remind you, please, to use the microphone and to introduce yourself and your news organization.

Q: Hi. My name is Dana Budeiri and I work for Al-Jazeera. My question is, please, have you been conducting any negotiations with the Arab countries neighboring Iraq on using any of their military bases in case a war is launched against Iraq?

Feith: We have been talking with countries all over the world about the nature of the threat, our thoughts about how we're going to address that threat, and various countries around the world have expressed an interest in working with us and supporting our efforts in various ways. We are going to stick to the policy that we've had since the beginning of the war on terrorism, which is not to comment on what other countries contribute and to allow each country that wants to participate in the coalition to characterize its own assistance to the coalition in the war on terrorism.

Q: Miroslav Komorana, Czech Public Radio. I'd like to go to -- take a mention to Afghanistan. So can you evaluate what was done, elaborate a little bit, in that year in Afghanistan. If you can also comment on the last interview with Hamid Karzai, I think it was on CNN, or just say what is the situation right now and what are the main objectives for the future in Afghanistan.

Feith: The situation right now in Afghanistan is, I would say, uneven. I mean the security situation is uneven. You have in the southeastern provinces a continued threat from concentrations of Taliban and al Qaeda forces, and there are ongoing, continual coalition military operations against the al Qaeda and Taliban forces in that region. Throughout much of the rest of Afghanistan, the security situation is better and there is, on our part, a greater emphasis on reconstruction in the security area and reconstruction in the economic area.

We are looking to develop some of the economic infrastructure. There's a very important project getting underway to build roads to connect the major cities in Afghanistan. There is also an intense interest in building up the ability of the central government in Afghanistan to provide security throughout the country. There's an effort -- intense effort to train forces for the Afghan National Army, to train the police, to help build a judicial infrastructure for the country, and to address the range of security concerns.

This involves coalition forces as such -- I mean, the forces operating in Operation Enduring Freedom -- and it also involves the international peacekeeping forces in ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force.

The trend right now is toward building up the -- developing these institutions in those parts of the country, these -- doing these reconstruction efforts in those parts of the country that are somewhat more stable. And what we're interested in doing is intensifying what we call stability operations in those parts of the country that have a relatively more stable situation. There will be ongoing combat operations in the areas that require it, but a more intense emphasis on stability operations where it's possible.

Moderator: (Off mike.)

Q: Thank you. Hi. I'm Natan Guttman from Ha'aretz newspaper, from Israel. I'd like to ask about the Hezbollah. Undersecretary Armitage said that the Hezbollah is the "A-Team of terrorism," and I was wondering what the administration's plans are to deal with this terrorist organization.

Feith: It is clear that anyone who contemplates the problem of the war against international terrorism recognizes that this war is against not simply a network of terrorists but a network of networks. And one of the most highly developed and most dangerous networks, as Secretary Armitage suggested, is Hezbollah. The -- I mean, we recognize that. It is an organization that is functioning in many continents, not just in -- I mean, it's based in -- its operations are based largely in Lebanon. It's supported by the Syrians and the Iranians. It has operations and cells in Africa, in South America, in Asia. We are certainly watching it, conscious of it, and it is one of the key international terrorist networks; there's no question about that.

I think that's all I can comment on at the moment.

Moderator: (Off mike.)

Q: Thomas Gorguissian, Al Wafd, Egypt. Mr. Secretary, after a year, what is your assessment of what's achieved? Is the al Qaeda network less threatening and America is more secure? Be dead or alive -- that was the bin Laden criteria or, let's say, the yardstick. Is this factor -- how this factor is affecting your assessment of what was achieved?

My second question: In the battle of ideas -- and it's very interesting to see the different officials talking about battle of ideas -- how do you define this battle? I mean, it's -- the impression overseas, especially that part of the world, is that Islam became the new "ism" after communism. And how do you assess this assessment or definition or description? And in this battle of ideas, are you just going to rely on smart bombs?

Feith: As for what's been accomplished with regard to al Qaeda, we have, as I said, taken the principal base of operations for al Qaeda, which was Afghanistan run by the Taliban -- we have eliminated it as a base for al Qaeda to operate from quietly and undisturbed. We haven't eliminated all of the al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, but they don't have the freedom of movement, they don't have the easy use of that base of operations. They are on the run in Afghanistan, and they are on the run elsewhere, because there have been active efforts by law enforcement officials in numerous countries against al Qaeda cells, against their operatives, against their financiers. And our goal was to do what we can to destroy and disrupt the al Qaeda network, to make al Qaeda go on the defensive, rather than remain on the offensive. And I think we've accomplished that. That doesn't mean that the work against al Qaeda is finished; it's not. And al Qaeda continues to exist in many countries, including, as I said -- including in Afghanistan. But it certainly does not have the kind of freedom of action that it had before the war started.

As for the battle of ideas: This administration has gone out of its way correctly and intelligently and morally to stress that the war on terrorism is by no means a war on Islam or in any way disrespectful of Islam as one of the world's great religions. It is clear that there is a battle within the world of Islam between extremists and the bulk of the Muslim world. And in that battle you see forces like those that were led by Osama bin Laden working to

push by brutal and violent method their version of Islam onto other Muslims.

And the terrorist organizations -- some of the terrorist organizations that we are concerned about have as their enemies and their targets not simply the United States or Israel or the West; they have fellow Muslims high on their list of targets and enemies. And it is clear that in this battle between most of the world of Islam on the one hand and these extremist terrorist groups on the other, we have -- the United States has; I think the whole civilized world has -- a strong interest in seeing the moderate opponents of the extremists prevail. And so I would make it absolutely clear that we're not thinking of this issue from the point of view of a war against Islam, and we are not thinking of this issue from the point of view of bombs -- smart bombs or otherwise. We are quite literally talking about ideas.

And there are governments that stand for certain propositions and that have -- there are countries that have large Muslim populations that function perfectly moderately and aspire to the same kinds of basic values and principles that we aspire to, that want prosperity and political stability and respect for the rights of their people. You know, at the top of the list is a country like Turkey. There are countries throughout the Muslim world that share, I think, important principles with us. And we have a strong interest in showing that those countries can be successful, can provide good lives for their people, can be an important integrated part of the international economy.

Those are all aspects of this battle of ideas that I referred to, and it's an important part of our strategy for dealing in the war on terrorism and specifically, as I said, to delegitimizing the kind of inhuman tactic of extremist groups -- in particular, the purposeful killing of civilians for political purposes.

Q: My name is Nestor Iqueda (ph), and I am an AP reporter for Latin America.

My question is not directly related to the war on terror, but to the U.S. military establishment. And as you know -- well, I am raising this question because among your responsibilities there are one that regards relations with foreign countries.

As you know, the defense minister of Chile is in town and she is going to meet this morning with the secretary of Defense. And for a long time, Chile

has been looking for some kind of acquisition of a fleet of at least 10 or 15 F-16 U.S. bombers. And the last year, the U.S. has agreed to make steps for releasing those planes to Chile.

My question is, is it the time for handing now to Chile this fleet of planes?

Feith: I am not going to comment on the specifics of that case, other than to say that the minister will be meeting with Secretary Rumsfeld today. They're going to be talking about the upcoming ministerial meeting of defense ministers that Chile is hosting, I believe, in November. The ministerial will be taking place just a day or two before the Prague NATO summit, which means you've got two enormously important events back to back. And I think that they will -- those two will help set a course of cooperation that the United States is going to be pursuing with countries throughout Latin America, and then, a day or two later, with the countries of Europe. And I think the combination should help further dispel the large amount of persistent nonsense about the United States as a unilateralist country. We have a great interest in working with friends all around the world, and we have lots of important defense relationships. And I think the conference that Chile is going to be hosting in November is going to help demonstrate that and advance that purpose.

An element of those relations is defense trade, as your question highlights. But as I said, I don't want to get into the, you know, specifics of particular arms sales right now.

Moderator: (Off mike.)

Q: Giampiero Gramaglia, Italian news agency ANSA. Two related questions, back to Afghanistan. First question: Last week Italy committed some combat troops to the war against terrorism in Afghanistan. Are more combat troops still needed in Afghanistan, and what for?

Second question: Are you satisfied, one year after, with the level of security and stability you described before in Afghanistan?

Feith: I would take the second question first. One is never satisfied with the level of security and stability if one has to continue to perform combat operations. Combat operations are a way of saying that you're not quite satisfied. So there is more work to be done, and we won't be satisfied until those kinds of operations are no longer required.

I guess that helps answer the first part of your question, which is, why has the Italian government just said that it's going to send the Alpini Battalion to Afghanistan? And the answer is that there is a continuing requirement for combat operations, and that Italian contribution is important and useful and much appreciated.

Moderator: (Off mike.)

Q: Nick Childs from BBC. President Bush in his remarks last night on Iraq made an appeal or issued a warning, depending on your point of view, to Iraqi generals, should it come to a showdown, not to follow the orders of Saddam Hussein if it comes to the use of chemical and biological weapons, or they would be treated as war criminals. Given the potential importance of this issue, can you say what else you could do to get that message through to same generals or soldiers, should it come to a showdown?

Feith: This is a subject about which we have given a fair amount of thought, and it is clear to us that there are important conflicts of interest between Saddam Hussein and his inner circle and virtually every other group in Iraq. And the difference of interests is not simply between the regime and all of its security forces, on the one hand, and the people of Iraq, on the other, although there are important differences there, but there are also important differences within the ranks of the regime and its security forces.

And it is very well known that in the fighting in Desert Storm, back in 1991, there were numerous defections by Iraqi armed forces. And Saddam runs a singularly brutal and tight tyranny, presumably because he has to; presumably, because if he didn't, the disaffection that exists throughout the country, including among people in his government and including among people in his armed forces, would translate into action against him. And it's with a recognition of that fact that we believe that officials and military officers will think twice about fulfilling orders, in the event of a conflict; they would

think twice about fulfilling orders to use weapons of mass destruction because if there were to be a military conflict, there is no question about how it would ultimately come out. And there will be life after the conflict, and people who have an interest in, you know, living that life without being treated as war criminals will not want to engage in the worst kinds of behavior and will not want to be connected with the use of weapons of mass destruction.

Q: (Off mike) -- Egypt. You mention there will be life after Saddam probably. In the case of Kosovo and Bosnia it was mentioned -- and correct me, if I'm wrong -- that American troops are not trained for peacekeeping, for peacekeeping and nation-building. Is there any change now in the preparations so the issues of Iraq, and before that Afghanistan, both these countries need peacekeeping, of course, first, and then nation-building.

Feith: Well, I don't think it's correct to say that U.S. troops are not trained in peacekeeping. That is one of the things that U.S. troops know about and are trained to do.

The term nation-building has a lot of baggage in it, so I don't favor that term. What I would say is, as I mentioned with regard to Afghanistan, we recognize that we have a strategic interest in the stability of Afghanistan, in helping to create the conditions that will allow an Afghan government to assume responsibility for the country, provide security in the country, lay a foundation for economic activity in the country and prevent the country from reverting to its status as a base of operations for terrorists.

And that -- we have a strategic interest in that. We do not want Afghanistan to become once again a haven for terrorists.

In thinking about Iraq, we are considering, while the diplomacy is going on in the hope that we can achieve our purposes without war -- we are naturally doing -- thinking about what might happen if there were to be a war. And if there were, we recognize that the postwar reconstruction efforts are enormously important and that we would have an important responsibility. And I'm sure that the United States will step up to that responsibility together with other countries.

And in a situation like that, one has to balance two important thoughts and communicate two important thoughts. One of them is the commitment after

a conflict like the conflict in Afghanistan or a possible conflict in Iraq -- the commitment to stay and fulfill one's responsibilities, to lay the foundation for a degree of stability and reconstruction in the country, and at the same time, the commitment to leave -- because we have no interest in running somebody else's country or owning somebody else's country or imposing our will on other people. And it's important to strike that balance in a responsible and prudent fashion so that you make sure that you take care of the interests that led to the military action to begin with but also show the appropriate respect for the rights of the people in the country.

Moderator: Take questions from -- (off mike).

Q: (Name inaudible) -- Czech Public Radio. I'd like to ask you, what will be the priorities in Prague summit, and how the U.S. policy will there react on the present stage of war -- terrorism?

Feith: The priorities for the Prague summit are to put NATO on course where it can remain an important alliance that contributes not only to the security of Europe but, more broadly, to the military capabilities of all the alliance members to do important work globally.

There's a recognition that the kind of threats that we face as an alliance are global and they can emanate from anywhere around the world. And what NATO is interested in doing is operating -- I mean, to put it schematically -- operating at three levels.

One is the level of strategy, and developing a common view of what the global and strategic security environment is and where NATO fits in.

Secondly, at the level of capability, so that once NATO recognizes that the security challenges are what they are, they are global, we are going to have to react as an alliance to threats that we become aware of on the basis of intelligence that is itself evanescent, and if it's not acted upon quickly will be irrelevant. So NATO needs a global capability, it needs a rapid action capability. And therefore, it needs the kinds of equipment and the kinds of organization that will allow it to do rapid action at long distances.

And then the third level is command control. It needs -- once it has that strategic view and it has the right capabilities, it needs the right kind of

decision-making apparatus so that it can act quickly.

And those are, I think, three themes that weave together into a concept of an important, relevant NATO moving forward to deal with the kinds of problems that we anticipate having to deal with in coming years.

Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you.

Mr. Feith was the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from July 2001 to August 2005

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

