

washingtonpost.com

A War Plan That Cast a Wide Net

By Douglas J. Feith

Saturday, August 7, 2004; Page A21

Advertisement

LIKE LEASES AS LOW
AS \$349 A MONTH AND
APRS AS LOW AS 0.9%.

Recently some journalists have called attention to a footnote in the Sept. 11 commission report that mentions a draft memo I prepared on Sept. 20, 2001. In that memo, as the report's footnote says: "[T]he author expressed disappointment at the limited options immediately available in Afghanistan and the lack of ground options. The author suggested instead hitting terrorists outside the Middle East in the initial offensive, perhaps deliberately selecting a non-al Qaeda target like Iraq. Since U.S. attacks were expected in Afghanistan, an American attack in South America or Southeast Asia might be a surprise to the terrorists."

My draft memo took up points made by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in a memo he wrote the previous day to Gen. Hugh Shelton, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that said initial U.S. war plans should emphasize, among other things, the worldwide nature of the conflict.

These ideas have been misinterpreted; see David Ignatius, "The Book on Terror," *Book World*, Aug. 1. So it may be useful to explain the circumstances in which they arose.

First of all, there was President Bush's insight that Sept. 11, 2001, revealed that the United States is at war, and that terrorism can no longer be treated primarily as a law enforcement problem. This may seem obvious now, but it wasn't then.

In the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11, the intelligence on the attackers was far from fully developed, and some critics of the administration were demanding evidence of the type needed for a conviction in a law court.

The term "war" meant that the enemy could not be thought of as a set of individuals who had perpetrated a particular crime. Nor was the enemy necessarily a single distinct organization. Rather, the enemy was understood to comprise all those who contributed to the terrorist threat to the United States, of which Sept. 11 was just the most serious instance to date. The enemy was thought of as the network of individuals, groups and states that committed or supported such acts of terrorism.

Going to war against terrorism meant going to war against this network. Obviously, those most directly responsible for Sept. 11 -- we soon understood them to be the al Qaeda group based in Afghanistan -- were primary targets. But that did not necessarily mean that attacking al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan had to be the first order of business. The timing and nature of U.S. military and other actions had to be designed to serve U.S. strategic purposes and to take into account what we could or could not expect to achieve militarily.

As it happened, the war in Afghanistan succeeded so quickly in ousting the Taliban and destroying the al Qaeda infrastructure there that the U.S. actions may now seem obvious, allowing commentators to scoff at the consideration of other options. But as folks with memories know, the reasonableness of the strategy we adopted was not universally acknowledged before the war. Recall the many commentators who warned that attempting to change Afghanistan's government would drag us into the quagmire that swallowed so many Soviet forces. Recall also the early complaints from critics that the United States was dropping bombs on enemies that lacked anything worth blowing up.

To appreciate the decisions made about the Afghanistan campaign, it helps to visualize how the world looked in late September 2001 -- not how it looks in hindsight. The United States had an interest in a swift response to the Sept. 11 attacks. The main goal was to disrupt the enemy's activities. To the extent possible, we wanted to reduce the enemy's ability to execute another attack against us. We could conduct air attacks on al Qaeda infrastructure in Afghanistan, but it was hard to identify targets whose destruction would seriously obstruct terrorist operations in the near term. And, in any case, U.S. intelligence was not adequate to ensure that such an air campaign would prove effective.

So we cast a wide net as we considered possible initial actions. We understood that the first U.S. strikes could serve additional objectives:

- Produce intelligence that would allow the United States to understand and counter the enemy.
- Create or aggravate fissures in the enemy network.
- Highlight the global nature of the conflict and the common interest of U.S. allies and friends in confronting the enemy.

Aiming to accomplish such purposes, we considered military options that might:

- Shock the enemy network, perhaps by hitting it where a U.S. response was not expected.
- Show seriousness of U.S. military purpose, to potential allies as well as to enemies, to make clear that the United States was now prosecuting a war.
- Show that the war would not be limited geographically to Afghanistan.
- Demonstrate the value in taking into account al Qaeda assets and support networks in areas other than Afghanistan.

According to The Post's Ignatius, when Defense Department officials, less than two weeks after Sept. 11, considered options other than the particular U.S. attack launched against al Qaeda in Afghanistan, we showed that we "didn't seem to get" the importance of the al Qaeda threat. Not so.

Pentagon officials have the duty to probe the assumptions of military commanders who write war plans. It is good and proper to ask such questions as: If the United States is expected to attack at point X, should we consider attacking at point Y? How directly or indirectly should we engage enemies? Retrospective ridicule of those types of questions is, so to speak, off target.

The writer is undersecretary of defense for policy.

© 2004 The Washington Post Company