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## APPG Event: A Lecture by Douglas J. Feith

**26th November 2010**

*By kind invitation of Gisela Stuart MP, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Transatlantic & International Security was pleased to host a discussion with Douglas J. Feith, Director of the Center for National Security Strategies, The Hudson Institute and former US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Mr Feith spoke about the American response to the 9/11 attacks and the global threat posed by Islamism. The discussion took place on Wednesday 10th November 2010 in the House of Commons.*

I'd like to thank the Henry Jackson Society for inviting me to speak here. My first job in Washington DC was working for Senator Jackson in

1975 and it registers in my mind that that was several epochs ago. The main preoccupation then was the Cold War and the danger of annihilation. Senator Jackson deserves credit for appreciating the Soviet Union's ideological vulnerability and the way that democratic ideas could erode the confidence of Soviet leaders. He was one of America's principal advocates of peace through strength, and by opposing the accommodationist détente policies of the Nixon and Carter administrations, he became an important contributor to what was arguably the greatest strategic victory in human history; the destruction of the Soviet Empire without war. Senator Jackson won admiration from both Democrats and Republicans in the US and it is a fine thing that he has admirers here too in the United Kingdom, so I am delighted to be talking to you today under the auspices of the Henry Jackson Society.

I became Undersecretary of Defence for policy in the George W Bush administration in the summer of 2001, just a few weeks before the 9/11 attack. The job is commonly referred to as the number three civilian position in the Pentagon and my responsibilities were to advise the Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, on national security strategies, to manage the Defence Department's foreign relations, and to represent the department in inter-agency policy making.

What I would like to share with you are some thoughts on the development of US strategy after the 9/11 attack, and to highlight what remains a large hole in that strategy. I do not intent to get into much discussion of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq – though I understand that is on lots of people's minds and I would be perfectly happy to talk about that if any of you want to raise questions.

After the 9/11 strikes against New York and Washington, there was a debate within the administration over what the purpose of our response should be. The standard response was a law enforcement approach. When we had terrorist attacks in the past, what the government tried to do was to identify the individual perpetrators and track them down and

apprehend them for trial. President Bush decided that that was not an adequate response to an attack on the scale of the one on the World Trade Centre, the Pentagon, and the hijacking of the third plane which was headed for somewhere in Washington. President Bush declared that the purpose of our response was not punishment, but to prevent the next attack. That was an unprecedented goal for the US government. I think it was arguably the most significant decision that President Bush made in office, and it launched what the President labelled 'the war on terrorism.'

Because the goal of the response to 9/11 was prevention, we could not focus exclusively on the people responsible for 9/11. We knew that the next attack might come from Al Qaeda, but it might come from another terrorist group. In other words, we did not simply have an Al Qaeda problem, we had a terrorism problem. So our strategy had to address all relevant groups and all relevant state supporters.

We recognised that a series of terrorist attacks could change the nature of our society. The immediate reaction to 9/11 was to shut down air traffic over the US and tighten security at ports and government buildings. You may recall that a few weeks after 9/11, anthrax contained in envelopes was mailed to various journalists and members of Congress. Mysteriously, to this day it has never been established who sent those envelopes. But after that, in addition to the other security measures, you had major restrictions imposed on the delivery of mail. Administration officials foresaw that if a series of attacks followed 9/11, the American people would demand increasingly stringent security measures; pressure would build for greater government intrusion; restrictions on personal privacy; more extensive domestic use of the military; and possibly ethnic profiling and other measures that, however repugnant, are the kind of steps that an outraged and fearful public could be expected to demand if they thought that public security required it.

We knew from history that civil liberties, sacrificed in pursuit of security, might not be recoverable, even if the threat were to diminish.

Airline security measures, which were adopted as a result of hijacking in the late 1960s and early 1970s, remained in place long after the hijackings largely stopped. So at stake in the war, as President Bush put it, was our way of life as a free and open society. In other words, the stakes could not be higher. This helped the US government to decide on a strategy of offence and initiative, rather than relying only on defensive measures taken at home at the expense of the openness of our society. The US strategy was to disrupt terrorist networks abroad to compel the terrorists to have to flee, hide, and play defence. President Bush decided that in dealing with the terrorists we had to either change the way we lived, or change the way they lived.

The principal strategic danger was the nexus of weapons of mass destruction, terrorist groups, and their state supporters. What 9/11 caused us to do was to re-examine the problem of terrorism. People had been thinking about the issue for a number of decades before 9/11, but in that period terrorism was generally seen as a phenomenon of self limited violence. The idea was that terrorist groups would commit some outrages to draw international attention to a political cause in the hope that they could convert that attention into sympathy. Palestinian terrorists developed the model: You blow up enough Israeli school busses, shoot up enough airline ticket counters, and Yasser Arafat gets invited to address the UN General Assembly.

When a terrorist's goal is ultimately political support for his cause, then weapons of mass destruction are ultimately not the weapon of choice. As a leading expert of terrorism commented during the pre 9/11 era, terrorist's wanted a lot of people watching but not a lot of people dead, and there was a strong empirical basis for the observation at the time it was made. But 9/11 was a departure. It was the first successful example of terrorism of mass destruction. The plotters who destroyed the World Trade Centre, a building in which 25-30 thousand people worked, were not seeking sympathy. They were trying to kill as many people as

possible. The number of their victims was limited only by their means, which focused the attention of administration officials on the threat of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists. There was also a coincidence of strategic importance in that the list of the countries that had governments that supported terrorism was essentially the same list as the countries of WMD proliferation concern.

Focusing on state supporters of terrorism was also important for another strategic reason, since we lacked precise intelligence about the terrorist groups. To prevent the next attack, we knew we had to disrupt the terrorist networks. But because we lacked precise intelligence on the whereabouts of terrorists, we could not strike them directly in many cases. Our indirect strategy was to strike their state supporters. If they could be made fearful of remaining part of the terrorist network, we believed that they might pull the reins in on the groups they dealt with. There were some successes in this regard: The Pakistani government cooperated with us in ways that it had not before 9/11; following the overthrow of the governments in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Libyan government decided that the WMD business was not a good business to be in and they invited the British and Americans to come in and dismantle their chemical weapons apparatus and their nuclear weapons programme. Furthermore, the Syrian government, for the first time in twenty years, pulled its military out of Lebanon. So we clearly had the attention of a number of these countries, and the idea that one does not have to take military action against all of the problem countries, but can use some examples to try to induce terrorist supporting countries to change their policies, yielded some successes. Of course, after the war in Iraq did not go well, there was some backsliding in a number of these areas, reflecting the belief on the part of some of the governments we were trying to pressure that we did not have an effective military threat behind our pressure any longer.

The US government developed a three part strategy against the terrorist

threat. The first part was to protect the homeland, the second was to disrupt and attack terrorist networks, and the third was to counter ideological support for terrorism. Much was done on the first two parts of the strategy, but not on the third. To highlight this deficiency, the National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism, which was produced in the Pentagon, stressed that countering Islamist ideology was the key to victory. We were concerned that if all we did was defend the homeland and disrupt and attack terrorist networks, we were going to be on a treadmill that was likely to accelerate over time.

The only way to get off the treadmill was to address the ideological problem and try to do something to prevent people from becoming murderous enemies to begin with. Organising a serious effort in this area remains a challenge since what is needed is far more than public diplomacy. The key is the debate among Muslims, and we need to have a strategy which recognises this point. We need to get beyond the view of the State Department Office of Public Diplomacy, which literally turned up to meetings with glossy brochures showing smiling Muslim children going to school in the United States and exercising their religious freedom. While that is all well and good, the problem is not what American officials say, or messages that we transmit into the Muslim world. The challenge is to stimulate and benignly influence the debate among Muslims about what kind of society they want to build for themselves, what their religion means, and who has the right to fly its banner.

There is a need to overcome deep institutional and cultural barriers if you are going to get a government like the United States to do anything in this field, and this hole in our strategy is not a criticism of the Obama Administration only. The Bush Administration was not able to organise a serious effort in this area either, even though there were a number of officials who understood this point. The US, like other liberal societies, is uncomfortable with the idea of official propaganda. Public affairs

(providing news information to journalists) are ok, but Americans in general react suspiciously to suggestions that their officials should engage in influence activities. This is understandable, especially when the relevant debates relate to religion. This, however, leaves an enormous hole in our strategy for dealing with this extremely serious problem.

This is why it is so important to distinguish between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a totalitarian political ideology. Islamism, the ideology not of an organisation but an international decentralised movement, is rooted in Islam, but is not the same thing as Islam. It is by no means inevitable that devout Muslims subscribe to this ideology. In fact, Islamism is opposed by most Muslims around the world. The challenge for American and other Western national security officials is how to amplify the voices within Muslim communities that oppose Islamist ideas and practices and support personal freedom, tolerance of various religious views, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. There are such voices - though they have to be courageous because the Islamist movement is notoriously violent, especially against Muslims who contradict its teachings.

Most Muslims, of course, do not live under the control of Islamist ideologues and do not appear to want to. The experiences of Iran, Sudan, Taliban Afghanistan, Gaza under Hamas management, or Iraq's Anbar Province under the sway of Zarqawi and Al Qaeda in Iraq hardly represent attractive advertisements for Islamist power. The Islamists record is one of corruption, poverty, brutality, murder, and tyranny. Yet, remarkably, the United States has no institutions or strategy in place to confront the extremist ideology of our terrorist enemies, and neither do our allies in Europe. A prime test of any official concerned with the terrorism problem is whether that official is making any efforts to address the problem not just through military and law enforcement means, but also on the level of ideas.

Many people in the West have become complacent about terrorism, which is a consequence, in part, of the successes that were achieved in combating terrorist networks since 2001. Very few people would have taken a bet on September 12, 2001 that we would get to a point nine years later where the US had not suffered another major terrorist attack. It is remarkable, bordering on shocking, that we have achieved that degree of success, and it has certainly not been for want of ill intention or effort on the part of terrorist groups. But the consequence of that kind of success is a remarkable degree of general complacency about the problem.

Tomorrow is Armistice Day commemorating the end of the First World War, and unlike that war, the West's current battle with Islamist extremist did not have a distinct start. 9/11 was not the start of the war, but the point at which many Americans, and other around the world, realised that we were already at war. The current problem will not have a distinct end, be it in a rail carriage or anywhere else. The current war is harder to describe and to prosecute than a classic military confrontation amongst states with armies. The thousands of corpses of the victims of Islamist terrorism in New York, Washington, London, Madrid, Jerusalem, Bali, Mumbai, Fort Hood Texas and elsewhere show us that this war, though unconventional and amorphous, is not merely an abstraction. It is bloody, destructive, widespread and persistent. It is not a problem that will go away if only we in the West modify our policies or adjust our attitudes. We did not prevent 9/11 with our obliviousness, and we will not avoid future attacks by denying there is a war or professing our lack of desire for conflict.

The thorniest and most important issue in tackling extremism is where one draws the line regarding who are the constructive voices within Muslim communities and who are not. It is certainly understandable that one's first instinct is to say that a sensible place to draw the line is advocacy of violence. You certainly do not want to have more people in

the hostile camp than you need to have, and no one would disagree that those advocating murder and terrorist attacks are a problem. However, that conclusion is not really adequate because the ideology that promotes bitter hostility and philosophical antagonism to our way of life; the view that suggests it is an offence against god for man to legislate, is completely hostile the whole idea of liberal democracy. Even if people do not actually advocate violence, the promotion of hostility based on those kinds of religious arguments, and often wrapped up in a victimological view of history, remains a problem. American, British and other democratic governments have reached out to various Islamist groups who promote an aggressive ideology, but who are willing to mutter an occasional statement distancing themselves from violence, and this is a mistake. The groups are often the most vocal in criticising Islamophobia, asserting that any criticism of the underlying ideology is anti-religious bigotry, and we should recognise that the ideological views of these groups are integral to the problem.

Countering complacency in confronting the Islamist threat is not a solvable problem. During the Cold War, there were bitter debates over the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the danger of nuclear war. But after the fall of communism, a number of people suggested that the Soviet Union had not been that greater problem to begin with because it had collapsed. Likewise, Saddam Hussein's Iraq was front and centre in the world's view of a dangerous regime, with sixteen Security Council Resolutions passed between the First Gulf War and 2003. Everybody recognised what a bloody, horrible, tyrannical, murderous regime he ran; the multiple wars he started; his defiance of the UN on economic sanctions and weapons of mass destruction programmes. Yet, once he was removed people said that only fanatics were worried about him and that the whole issue was based on an error. It is in the nature of things that once people stop worrying about a problem, they tend to minimise the significance of that problem. It requires people who have seriousness of mind to read history or remember the views that were held at the time.

One of the main things that people in government do is to try to anticipate problems and head them off. But if you succeed, people will tell you that the whole effort was ridiculously exaggerated because the problem you were trying to prevent never materialised. Think what Winston Churchill's reputation would have been had he been listened to in the mid 1930s. He probably would have gone down in history as a warmonger who drove the country into a premature or unnecessary battle. If you are the Cassandra and nobody listens to you, and then the catastrophe occurs, that may be fine for you, but not so great for your country. There is not a solution to the problem, other than for those who understand what needs to be done to do it, whether or not there is a lot of public support for their actions or not.

We have not solved the semantic problem. From the beginning, Secretary Rumsfeld did not like the term 'war on terrorism' since it was naming an activity rather than an enemy. The reason the term was used was the President's eagerness to enact a major effort in the wake of 9/11 and to demonstrate that he was moving beyond the law enforcement model of response. The term, which was coined within 48 hours of the attack, was a clever way of getting round the problem of who the enemy was by labelling it a war against an inherently evil activity. To this day, we still have no neat definition of who the enemy is, because the enemy is a decentralised movement, rather than a single organisation or a coalition of a handful of countries.

These problems go further than semantics; they are a strategic problem. There is no question that there is a real phenomenon out there; someone is killing all these people and launching these attacks. But how those committing the attacks relate to one another, and how to describe the nature of the networking and political movement, are not easy questions to answer. It is not an abstract concept since the victims are real, but defining the enemy is very difficult.

Secretary Rumsfeld did not like the term 'war' either since it

overemphasised the military instrument. He was one of the people early on who was arguing that a comprehensive strategy should not rely solely or even principally on military means. The Europeans in general objected to the term because they believed they were beyond war. But while you may think you are beyond war, if other people believe they are at war with you, then you are at war. This is something the American's discovered on 9/11, and it is something everybody has to learn to deal with.

It would be highly desirable to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, but I do not think that resolving it would make the broader problem of Islamist antagonism to the West disappear. The common view that much of the motivation for the terrorist problem is the Arab-Israeli conflict is not borne out by the history of the issue over recent decades. If you look at the writings, the debriefings, and the interviews people have done with captured terrorists, the idea that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the main engine for their hostility is not supported. There is a very good motivation to solve the dispute for its own sake, but it would not make the broader terrorism problem go away.

I wrote a book of my time in the Pentagon entitled War and Decision. It tries to deal with the development of the strategy for a post-Saddam political transition in Iraq, which was a key element of the post-war planning. The essence of the strategy was to try to avoid the creation of a US-led occupation government. The basic thinking at the Pentagon was to build on the experience of Afghanistan, where we overthrew the Taliban government but did not set up an occupation government. We put the Afghans, through an international programme that the UN was involved in, in charge of their own country immediately after the overthrow of the Taliban. While the exact same technique could not be used in Iraq, the goal was to put the Iraqis in charge of their own affairs as early as possible, and not have a protracted occupation. This was the plan that was worked out, developed and approved by the President, but

then – as the book deals with – gradually undone.

The single biggest mistake we made in Iraq was setting up an occupation government for fourteen months. At the beginning of that period we had problems, but at the end of that period we had a full blown insurgency. Of course, not all of the problems resulted from that mistake, and there may have been an insurgency anyway. But all of the major problems we had in Iraq were aggravated by the mistakes that were made regarding political transition and the decision that was taken in the field to run the country for an extended period of time, so that we blew the opportunity to consolidate our position as the liberators of the country and instead became the occupiers of the country. That played into the paranoia and conspiracy theory mongering that is endemic in Middle Eastern politics.

There can be no doubt that Central Command was mainly focused on ‘Phase III’, which was major combat operations, rather than ‘Phase IV’, which was the post-Saddam operations, and this was a problem. In Washington, there was a lot of focus on Phase IV and quite a bit of good thinking on the subject, but there were factional fights between the departments. The Pentagon’s views were at odds with the State Department and the CIA and there were some basic disagreements over how to deal with Iraqis before the war, how to empower them after the war, and who should run the government in the immediate aftermath of Saddam’s overthrow, which were never resolved. Even when the President made a decision, there were rearguard bureaucratic actions against those decisions. A large part of the problems we had resulted from seriously divided government. It was therefore not a lack of thought, but a lack of agreement over how to proceed, that created many of the problems. We started with one policy that was quite sound and quite well thought through, and then we veered off in another direction which reflected a view that had been aired in Washington and rejected, but was then implemented in the field. If there is a divided government, then ultimately the President is the man responsible.

There is an important distinction to be made between Islam as a religion and as an ideology. The best evidence of that are the huge numbers of devout Muslims who do not subscribe to the ideology. It does not do any good to essentially declare war against a religion of a billion people; it is not the path to victory.

The troubles that we have seen over in Iraq and Afghanistan have undermined America's ability to project its power in the future. In the summer of 2003, the Iranians understood full well that we had just overthrown the government to the right of them, and the government to the left of them. We had their attention and, as a result, they responded by engaging the British, French and Germans in the first serious discussions about their nuclear programme. Though there are serious Iran scholars who argue that diplomacy would not have worked anyway, the willingness of the government to engage showed that we clearly had their attention, and that they were worried. The same is true of Libya with Colonel Gadaffi, who had stiff-armed the world over his WMD programme for years until he saw Saddam come out of his spider hole and decided that he was better off without WMD. However, when America did get backed down in the war in Iraq, the Iranians came to the conclusion that America's diplomacy was not backed by any kind of credible threat any longer and they behaved accordingly by hardening their position. The successful, effective use of military force has influence, but so does the unsuccessful, ineffective use of military force.

The interesting question to ponder is what lessons future leaders around the world will take from the period when they look back at it. Will they conclude that the United States is not worth worrying about, or will they draw the lesson that fumble though we might, we are a very powerful country and we sometimes do something fierce? What we do know – from a book titled The Iraqi Perspectives Project put together from the interrogation record of captured Iraqi officials – is the Iraqi view of this recent history. Saddam pointed out that he did not believe that the United

States would go to Baghdad in 2003. This view was derived from the experience of the first Gulf War when Saddam had believed that coalition forces would roll to Baghdad after throwing his forces out of Kuwait. When they failed to do so, Saddam concluded that he had won 'the mother of all battles'. He talked about this constantly to the people around him and became determined that America had demonstrated that it did not have the stomach for casualties. In addition to this experience he cited the examples of Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia as further proof that the US would not be willing to take action that led to substantial casualties. This reading of American history ensured that America's diplomacy was unsuccessful in the build-up to the Second Gulf War. This is worth bearing in mind when making policy. However, the complexity of recent history in recent years means that it is not clear what lessons a future dictator will draw from looking back at the period. It is not a reasonable lesson to conclude that America can be ignored, but whatever messages are taken away by future leaders will have an important influence upon whether America's diplomacy is taken seriously.

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