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LOCAL COMMENT: U.S. off target in terror war

Nation can't root out problem having wrong view of attackers

March 7, 2003

BY SCOTT ATRAN

Portrayals of suicide attackers as evil, crazed cowards who thrive in poverty and ignorance are wrong, and do nothing to help stop them. Studies show that most human bombs have no appreciable psychopathology and are at least as educated and economically well-off as surrounding populations. Muslim suicide attackers are mostly ordinary folk from middle-class families, with respectable jobs or careers in the making.

When President George W. Bush declared, "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror," he may have been affirming compassion and commitment to the world's poor, but he was not addressing root causes of terrorism, such as historical or political grievances.

The first line of defense against suicide terrorism should be to prevent people from becoming terrorists. We need ways to convince communities to stop supporting institutions that recruit terrorists. This may involve interfaith dialogue, not ethnic profiling, and addressing grievances to lessen conflict and erase daily images of violence.

This does not mean negotiating over all grievances and goals, including Al Qaeda's quest to replace the Western-inspired system of nation states with a global caliphate. Al Qaeda seeks no compromise, but most people who currently sympathize with the group might.

The administration's offensive policies against terrorism are also off track. The new strategic doctrine of preemptive attack on terrorists and potential supporters of terrorism is based on the false premise that those who would commit suicide in their assaults are not rational and are not deterred by rational concepts, according to U.S. Sen. John Warner, R-Va., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Simplistic preachings about rational vs. irrational, evil vs. good, or even terrorism vs. liberation, do little to help the cause.

vs. cooperation, play to the choir, but only confound what must be deeply thought through.

During the 1980s and up to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Reagan and Bush administrations supported Iraq's war machine. Aid continued as Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein developed and unleashed weapons of mass destruction on Iran and on his own people. The United States stymied attempts in the United Nations to condemn Iraq. Conceivably, the current U.S. administration has had a change of heart unrelated to self-interest, but the world is not convinced. Iraq was stronger and more aggressive in the 1980s than today.

It is plausible to interpret popular support for war with Iraq as misplaced revenge for 9/11, with a relatively weak and well-defined target acting as a surrogate for a more potent and elusive one. Also, strategic control of the area (focusing on oil reserves) has been a policy goal since the Truman era.

Post-war plans for Iraq on the model of the post-WWII Marshall plan for Germany or Gen. Douglas MacArthur's reconstruction of Japan strike Middle East experts as foolhardy. The United States was able to generate civil societies in Germany and Japan because both countries were ethnically homogenous, highly nationalistic and economically well developed. Iraq is a colonial construction forced upon an ethnic hodgepodge in the aftermath of World War I.

Ridding Iraq of Hussein and the Baath leadership could result in a Yugoslavia-style breakup into old tribal enmities. The reticence of Western Europeans to accept U.S. claims and promises for Iraq reflect well-justified skepticism and worry, which is not exclusively motivated by French perfidy or Germany's weasel character as media pundits would have Americans believe.

Secretary of State Powell increases doubt with the spurious claim that Osama bin Laden -- who relentlessly denounces Hussein the Infidel -- is in partnership with Hussein. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's dismissal of Old Europe and hysterical calls to boycott France, America's oldest ally, spearheaded by U.S. House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., and Rep. James Saxton, R-N.J., are woefully short-sighted.

Similarly, leaked discussions of the Pentagon's nuclear posture review that consider development of low-yield mini-nukes and which identify Russia, China, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Syria as

China, North Korea, Iraq, Iran and Syria as potential targets do not inspire confidence. The millions of ordinary people who recently demonstrated in European capitals and throughout the world are profoundly troubled and afraid, not of Iraq, but of the Bush administration's reactive bellicosity and pretension to decide alone what is right for the world.

According to recent surveys, vast majorities of people in Muslim nations view America negatively, and a sentiment that America is the greatest menace to world peace has taken hold among our oldest and dearest allies. If not checked by redirected action and deliberation on the part of the United States, this situation potentially poses a more serious threat to peace and security for America and the world than Saddam Hussein, or even Osama bin Laden.

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