

View Abroad: Bush's War on Terrorism Is Floundering

By Dan Plesch

President Theodore Roosevelt said famously about power, "Speak softly but carry a big stick."

But the Bush administration's policy of "strike first" is more like "Talk loudly and get in everyone's face." For America's allies, the new Bush Doctrine of attacking people before they attack us, known as "first strike," is another example of a bull-in-a-china shop approach to world affairs.

Americans are right to expect clear and aggressive leadership against its foes in the world—and there's a good deal to be said for Texan frankness. But the problem is that this "take on the world" approach is ineffective. Behind the hype, there's a long list of failures to tackle key issues, and not much prospect of improvement.

For example, the Saudi government says it does not support the coalition against terrorism. Many Saudi citizens help fund or are members of al Qaeda, but the Bush administration is handling the Saudi government with kid gloves. U.S. special forces aren't allowed to operate in the Kingdom, nor are American law enforcement officials permitted to interrogate terrorist suspects detained on Saudi soil. No such sensitivities are displayed toward other countries. So much for the "You are either with us or against us" doctrine.

Then there's the failure of U.S. intelligence to hunt down terrorists. The American people now understand that the Bush administration not only failed to connect the dots before September 11th, it wasn't paying enough attention. This can't be blamed on the fact that President Bush was not long in office. The reality is, the administration brought in a highly experienced national security team that had stayed in close touch during the Clinton years.

Now the administration is touting the new Department of Homeland Security as a giant

step toward reform of the U.S. intelligence community. But even well-publicized federal arrests of low-level terrorist wannabes like Jose "The Dirty Bomber" Padilla should not distract us from the huge problem we still face in collecting accurate intelligence on terrorist activities.

A simple chain of logic applies to intelligence. To get good intelligence you have to be able to work around the world, and that in turn takes good cooperation with your friends. To get that cooperation you need to give your allies respect. This is as true in world affairs as it is in your local neighborhood. But right now, respect is about the last thing we get from U.S. officials—there's no rethinking of U.S. positions on other issues that concern us, such as global warming, the International Criminal Court, and the Middle East.

The Bush team seems to think the U.S. military—now functioning as a global SWAT team—is all it needs. But SWAT teams need to know where to hit and when, and they need to get the job done when they do go in. Otherwise, the result is the same as "Pin the Tail on the Donkey."

This is what happened in Afghanistan. After early success in driving the Taliban out of Kabul, U.S. commanders kept their soldiers out of harm's way and the bad guys slipped away in the mountains.

The Bush administration was anxious to deflect public attention from the lack of progress in capturing bin Laden and Taliban Leader Mullah Omar. President Bush had to find someone or something to take the heat. This is where the "Axis of Evil" comes in.

Mr. Bush's targeting of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, and now his threat of preemptive

attacks, don't have much to do with global terrorism. Neither Iraq nor North Korea, odious though these governments are, have much of a record of supporting global terrorism. The Iranians, hoping to improve ties with the European Union, have little in common with bin Laden. These countries are just the "usual suspects" on the U.S. most wanted list.

Americans may need to get the bad guys before they get them, but advertising the fact is just useless bravado to many of us observing this war from abroad. Worse, it gives the impression that this administration, while dismissing our concerns and even our cooperation in some instances, is now dangerously floundering in its war against terrorism.

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