

Can't Find Osama? Attack Iran Instead

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Theme: [Terrorism](#)

The July 17 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) "[On the Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland](#)" [.pdf] warns that al-Qaeda has reconstituted itself in the tribal areas of U.S. ally Pakistan, that it has resumed training of cadres intending to carry out "high impact plots" against the United States, and that the terrorist threat for the next three years continues worldwide and is even growing in places like North Africa and Britain. As always there is a bland euphemism to define the emerging situation, in this case that the United States will be experiencing a "heightened threat environment." And to make sure that the conflation of terrorism with Iraq is not lost on the reader, the "central front" in Iraq makes an appearance among the report's "Key Findings."

In a tour-de-force of misinformation disguised as fact, the report states, erroneously, that al-Qaeda in Iraq represents the principal threat for an attack on the U.S. homeland "because it has expressed a desire to attack us here." The "attack us here" theme has been around for several years, and it has lately been reinforced by the White House's incessant linkage of Iraq to al-Qaeda, culminating in a July 10 speech in Cleveland in which President Bush named the terrorist organization 30 times during comments that were ostensibly on the war in Iraq. Anyone who follows terrorism even in a pedestrian fashion might politely suggest that the administration's position on the terrorism problem is nonsense. The main threat to the U.S. comes from the real original unadulterated al-Qaeda in Pakistan. Iraq, though a magnet and training ground for terrorist aspirants, is neither interested in nor capable of exporting its own particular brand of anarchy to America's shores.

Given the prominence of Iraq, the NIE is clearly more a political document than an objective assessment. It goes on to state that the U.S. has been on the offensive against terrorism, that it has "built new institutions" and "developed new tools." It is "constantly evaluating the threat" in hundreds if not thousands of meetings in Washington. Lots of meetings. Lots of reviews. Lots of worker bees working. The irrepressible Karen Hughes at State Department has summoned her Myrmidons, "countering al-Qaeda's violent message," challenging terrorists to cyber duels over the Internet. It's Star Wars all over again. "We remain vigilant." It's all there in the NIE.

But one might be forgiven for thinking, perhaps, that all is not well, that the terrorism problem is somehow worse now than it was in 2001. Such reflection, which would be appropriate for anyone who truly cares about the United States and its people, leads to the inescapable conclusion that the past six years of misdirection and mismanagement have made the world a much more dangerous place. In that light, one might conclude that the NIE is more a chronicle of failure than success, an admission that the White House and Congress have, in fact, been unable to protect the American people. It might also be observed that one doesn't get as much bang for the buck as used to be the case. The

expenditure of half a trillion dollars in a “global war on terrorism” (GWOT) that has led to the deployment of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, intelligence officers, and law enforcement personnel against no more than a couple of thousand terrorists concentrated in one of the world’s most backward regions has not radically shifted the playing field in America’s favor. Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda carried out 9/11. Osama has been hanging around in Pakistan since late 2001, and he is still there, training new terrorists and planning.

And, if something is wrong in the GWOT, as usual no one is to blame, as-finger pointing would reflect badly on the political leadership. Retired Gen. Tommy Franks, the architect of the administration’s failure to finish off a cornered Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan’s Tora Bora Mountains in December 2001, received his Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2004. He now sits on the boards of the Bank of America and Outback Steakhouse, and it is assumed that he will soon be named president of Oklahoma State University. Ex-CIA Director George Tenet, who claims he warned Condoleezza Rice about an impending terrorist attack but, inexplicably, failed to tell the president, just received a \$4 million book advance. Paul Wolfowitz, whose lack of judgment guaranteed that the U.S. occupation of Iraq would not succeed, is now comfortably back at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute after his failure at the World Bank.

The blundering of the past six years in which America’s friends overseas have been turned into enemies by arrogance and bullying, in which Washington’s standing among nations has plummeted, has not resulted in any serious change of course. No one is responsible. The neoconservative architects of the Pentagon assault on Iraq that has turned that country into a failed state and a magnet for terrorism have left for greener pastures, but not a one has admitted to error or been publicly admonished. Several, including Vice President Dick Cheney and the National Security Council’s Elliot Abrams, are still in positions of power, advocating a new war as part of a larger conflict that will go on indefinitely, everywhere.

And it’s always convenient to blame it on the bad guys. Per the NIE, terrorism is not a problem because America’s politicians, bureaucrats, and pundits stacked a hundred high in every office lining the Potomac have failed to understand the nature of the threat. It is rather because the terrorists have “evolved” and “adapted,” hardly playing fair.

The NIE is not pleasant reading, even though it tries to make the essentially political point that everything possible is being done to protect “the Homeland.” What it really is arguing is that everything that is being done should continue to be done, and more. That means more of the bloated bureaucracy of the Department of Homeland Security and the world’s mightiest military budget. Another White House tactical response to the very real terrorist threat, which it doesn’t want anyone to think about too much, is, predictably, to look for a diversion in the form of someone else to kick. With Iraq and Afghanistan in shambles, there just happen to be a couple of neighbors who can be credibly accused of “interference” with the U.S. military’s civilizing mission. In the intelligence business it is sometimes necessary to use “disinformation” to establish a false factual basis or to create a straw man that can be used to divert attention from an unpleasant reality. If it is too hard to catch Osama bin Laden, it might be more convenient to talk about Iran instead. As Syria and Iran have both long been in the crosshair of the neoconservatives because of those countries’ antipathy to Israel, it is reassuring to know that they have not been forgotten by the White House. It is possibly no coincidence that there has been a significant increase in the anti-Iran rhetoric emanating from both the Bush administration and Congress over the past few weeks, mostly seeking to establish a *casus belli* by contending that Iran is masterminding lethal attacks directed against U.S. troops in Iraq and NATO forces in Afghanistan. A tidy little war against

Iran would be a useful diversion that would make everyone forget about the NIE and the inability to do anything about Osama bin Laden.

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