
August 13, 2006**Does Calling It Jihad Make It So?**By [DAVID E. SANGER](#)

SOON after the British police announced last week that they had broken up a plot to blow up aircraft across the Atlantic, President Bush declared the affair “a stark reminder that this nation is at war with Islamic fascists.”

British officials, on the other hand, referred to the men in custody as “main players,” and declined to discuss either their motives or ideology so that they would not jeopardize “criminal proceedings.”

The difference in these initial public characterizations was revealing: The American president summoned up language reaffirming that the United States is locked in a global war in which its enemies are bound together by a common ideology, and a common hatred of democracy. For the moment, the British carefully stuck to the toned-down language of law enforcement.

A critical debate in America today — among political candidates and among national security experts — is whether five years of war declarations and war-making have helped to make the United States more secure. Or, even in the absence of a major attack on American soil since 9/11, has this strategy created greater danger by providing terror groups with exactly what they crave: the sense that they are a unified army of jihadists? And has the strategy radicalized large swaths of the Muslim world in ways that were not imaginable as recently as 2003?

For the White House, the bomb plot last week was Exhibit A in defense of the war strategy: the plotters would go after Americans, war or no war in [Iraq](#). But critics argue that merging the global war on terror and Iraq was creating new jihadists, from Indonesia to Walthamstow, the East London area where much of the plot was hatched.

Few questioned whether the war-on-terror strategy made sense right after 9/11. The war in Afghanistan greatly degraded [Al Qaeda](#)'s organizational ability, although there were indications last week that the terror network had links to the homegrown suspects in the London plot.

President Bush and Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) derided what they saw as the law enforcement approach of the Clinton years. As Mr. Cheney told visiting diplomats

recently, “There was a war on in the 1990’s, but we didn’t know it.”

He routinely recites a history of terror plots against Americans over the past two decades, from the destruction of a Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 to the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000 — all of which, he said, were treated like police investigations, emboldening the plotters of 9/11.

“You’ll see case after case of terrorists hitting America or American targets — and America failing to hit back hard enough,” Mr. Cheney said in a recent speech.

The test of American willpower, Mr. Cheney and Mr. Bush have insisted, is in Baghdad, which explains why they stick to the language that it is the “central front” in the war on terrorism and domino that America cannot let fall. Defeat there, they warn, would give the jihadists a victory and empower them to move on to the next country — maybe Pakistan, maybe Saudi Arabia, maybe Lebanon.

The question is whether that approach — and the language that goes with it — creates a trap for the administration.

“I think that what is happening is that everything is getting magnified,” said Stephen Cohen, a Mideast scholar at the Israel Policy Forum. “Just like every small crisis around the world was part of the cold war, every one is now part of the struggle between militant Islam and the United States. And that makes individual conflicts harder to solve,” and an inspiration for jihad.

Mr. Cohen cited the American approach to the Israeli-[Hezbollah](#) conflict. If that conflict were once again regarded as just another chapter in a long-running regional dispute, the stakes would be lower in Washington, making it easier for the United States to play a more traditional peace-making role.

The administration response is that it describes the world the way it is — rather than ducking the realities of the Mideast.

Although she worries that the language of “Islamic fascism” risks alienating Muslim communities, Farhana Ali, a political analyst at the RAND Corporation, said: “I don’t blame the administration for treating this as a war, because it is one in many ways. It’s a political war.”

She points to the video released last month, exactly a year after the London subway bombings. In it, one plotter who died in the attacks, seeming to speak from the grave, warned that the explosions were just the beginning of bigger attacks.

Daniel Benjamin, author of “The Next Attack,” a book about the future of terrorism, said: “The tube bombers in [Britain](#) were clearly motivated in large

measure by Iraq. They were obsessed about it. “

Washington has tried, at times, to soften its message. Mr. Bush has launched diplomatic efforts to convince the Muslim world that the battle is with terrorists, not with “a great religion.” The administration provided aid to the tsunami victims in Indonesia, partly also to remind the world’s largest Muslim nation that American goals go beyond counterinsurgency operations.

But those military operations are what most of the world watches each night. A mystery of the London plot is whether Al Qaeda incited it — as its surviving leadership seeks to prove it can still pack a punch — and whether the suspects were prompted by televised military imagery.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said on Friday: “If I could ask one question as an interrogator to the guys they just arrested, I’d want to find out who they were and what they were thinking about this kind of attack before Iraq, or after. I’d want to know whether they have longstanding anger at the U.S., or are we adding fuel to the fire, and making new extremists. I don’t mean that Iraq was right or wrong, but every action has consequences.”

In the current issue of *The Atlantic*, [James Fallows](#) argues that the imagery of the “long war” — one that has already lasted longer than the Korean conflict — is self-defeating. “An open-ended war is an open-ended invitation to defeat,” he wrote. “Sometime there will be more bombings, shootings, poisonings and other disruptions in the United States.” Some will be the work of Islamic extremists, some not. He added: “If they occur while the war is still on, they are enemy ‘victories,’ not misfortunes of the sort that great nations suffer.”

For Mr. Bush, however, dropping the talk of a “long war” would be to send a message that America can go back to sleep. Thus, each terrorist attack or threat is woven into the bigger picture of a global struggle.

It helps explain the recent redeployment of American troops to the streets of Baghdad: to pull out early would be a return to the failed approach of the 1990’s. It would be another Somalia, another Beirut. The problem is whether staying may give the jihadists something else: A narrative of never-ending conflict, in a war to be fought in Baghdad, in Lebanon and in economy class over the wing of a 747.

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