

## NEWS: Seymour Hersh reports plans for war on Iran, broad covert aggression elsewhere

Written by Henry Adams

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If Seymour Hersh is right, aggressive neoconservatives will have a free hand in George W. Bush's second term. -- The investigative reporter extraordinaire reports in the new number of the *New Yorker* that those who think that a new realism and pragmatism is in the cards for George W. Bush's second term are wrong. -- According to Hersh, the administration's intentions are as ideologically fanatical as ever, and the neoconservatives are in the driver's seat. -- Hersh is generally believed to have an unparalleled circle of inside informants in government defense and intelligence circles. -- Hersh's main points in his new article: -- (1) "The war on terrorism [will] be expanded, and effectively placed under the Pentagon's control. The President has signed a series of findings and executive orders [*to get a sense of how important such orders are, see [Steven Aftergood's Jan. 11 piece](#) --H.A.*] authorizing secret commando groups and other Special Forces units to conduct covert operations against suspected terrorist targets in as many as ten nations in the Middle East and South Asia." -- (2) "The next strategic target [is] Iran." -- (3) "The Administration has been conducting secret reconnaissance missions inside Iran at least since last summer. . . . The goal is to identify and isolate three dozen, and perhaps more, . . . targets that could be destroyed by precision strikes and short-term commando raids." -- (4) "An American commando task force has been set up in South Asia and . . . has been penetrating eastern Iran from Afghanistan in a hunt for underground installations." -- (5) "The government of Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani President, has won . . . American assurance that Pakistan will not have to hand over A. Q. Khan." -- (6) "Defense Department civilians, under the leadership of Douglas Feith, have been working with Israeli planners and consultants to develop and refine potential nuclear, chemical-weapons, and missile targets inside Iran." -- (7) "Strategists at the headquarters of the U.S. Central Command, in Tampa, Florida, have been asked to revise the military's war plan, providing for a maximum ground and air invasion of Iran." -- (8) "The hawks in the Administration believe that it will soon become clear that the Europeans' negotiated approach [to Iran] cannot succeed, and that at that time the Administration will act." -- (9) "A broad counter-terrorism Presidential finding [permits] the Pentagon 'to operate unilaterally in a number of countries where there is a perception of a clear and evident terrorist threat.' . . . Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Malaysia. (. . . Tunisia is also on the list.)" -- (10) "Rumsfeld . . ., Stephen Cambone, . . . and Army Lieutenant General William G. (Jerry) Boykin, will be part of the chain of command for the new commando operations. Relevant members of the House and Senate intelligence committees have been briefed." -- (11) "The legal questions about the Pentagon's right to conduct covert operations without informing Congress have not been resolved." -- (12) "The new rules will enable the Special Forces community to set up what it calls 'action teams' in the target countries overseas. . . . [A] former high-level intelligence official . . . said. "The objective now is to recruit locals in any area we want. And we aren't going to tell Congress about it." -- (13) "The intelligence-reform bill . . . was 'a compromise . . . in which the Pentagon keeps its marbles and the C.I.A. loses theirs.'" ...

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## THE COMING WARS

By Seymour M. Hersh

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\*\* What the Pentagon can now do in secret. \*\*

George W. Bush's reelection was not his only victory last fall. The President and his national-security advisers have consolidated control over the military and intelligence communities' strategic analyses and covert operations to a degree unmatched since the rise of the post-Second World War national-security state. Bush has an aggressive and ambitious agenda for using that control -- against the mullahs in Iran and against targets in the ongoing war on terrorism -- during his second term. The C.I.A. will continue to be downgraded, and the agency will increasingly serve, as one government consultant with close ties to the Pentagon put it, as "facilitators" of policy emanating from President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney. This process is well under way.

Despite the deteriorating security situation in Iraq, the Bush Administration has not reconsidered its basic long-range policy goal in the Middle East: the establishment of democracy throughout the region. Bush's reelection is regarded within the Administration as evidence of America's support for his decision to go to war. It has reaffirmed the position of the neoconservatives in the Pentagon's civilian leadership who advocated the invasion, including Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Douglas Feith, the Under-secretary for Policy. According to a former high-level intelligence official, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff shortly after the election and told them, in essence, that the naysayers had been heard and the American people did not accept their message. Rumsfeld added that America was committed to staying in Iraq and that there would be no second-guessing.

"This is a war against terrorism, and Iraq is just one campaign. The Bush Administration is looking at this as a huge war zone," the former high-level intelligence official told me. "Next, we're going to have the Iranian campaign. We've declared war and the bad guys, wherever they are, are the enemy. This is the last hurrah -- we've got four years, and want to come out of this saying we won the war on terrorism."

Bush and Cheney may have set the policy, but it is Rumsfeld who has directed its implementation and has absorbed much of the public criticism when things went wrong -- whether it was prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib or lack of sufficient armor plating for G.I.s' vehicles in Iraq. Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers have called for Rumsfeld's dismissal, and he is not widely admired inside the military. Nonetheless, his reappointment as Defense Secretary was never in doubt.

Rumsfeld will become even more important during the second term. In interviews with past and present intelligence and military officials, I was told that the agenda had been determined before the Presidential election, and much of it would be Rumsfeld's responsibility. The war on terrorism would be expanded, and effectively placed under the Pentagon's control. The President has signed a series of findings and executive orders authorizing secret commando groups and other Special Forces units to conduct covert operations against suspected terrorist targets in as many as ten nations in the Middle East and South Asia.

The President's decision enables Rumsfeld to run the operations off the books -- free from legal restrictions imposed on the C.I.A. Under current law, all C.I.A. covert activities overseas must be authorized by a Presidential finding and reported to the Senate and House intelligence committees. (The laws were enacted after a series of scandals in the nineteen-seventies involving C.I.A. domestic spying and attempted assassinations of foreign leaders.) "The Pentagon doesn't feel obligated to report any of this to Congress," the former high-level intelligence official said. "They don't even call it 'covert ops' -- it's too close to the C.I.A. phrase. In their view, it's 'black reconnaissance.' They're not even going to tell the CINCs" -- the regional American military commanders-in-chief. (The Defense Department and the White House did not respond to requests for comment on this story.)

In my interviews, I was repeatedly told that the next strategic target was Iran. "Everyone is saying, 'You can't be serious about targeting Iran. Look at Iraq,'" the former intelligence official told me. "But they say,

‘We’ve got some lessons learned -- not militarily, but how we did it politically. We’re not going to rely on agency pissants.’ No loose ends, and that’s why the C.I.A. is out of there.”

For more than a year, France, Germany, Britain, and other countries in the European Union have seen preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon as a race against time -- and against the Bush Administration. They have been negotiating with the Iranian leadership to give up its nuclear-weapons ambitions in exchange for economic aid and trade benefits. Iran has agreed to temporarily halt its enrichment programs, which generate fuel for nuclear power plants but also could produce weapons-grade fissile material. (Iran claims that such facilities are legal under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or N.P.T., to which it is a signator, and that it has no intention of building a bomb.) But the goal of the current round of talks, which began in December in Brussels, is to persuade Tehran to go further, and dismantle its machinery. Iran insists, in return, that it needs to see some concrete benefits from the Europeans -- oil-production technology, heavy-industrial equipment, and perhaps even permission to purchase a fleet of Airbuses. (Iran has been denied access to technology and many goods owing to sanctions.)

The Europeans have been urging the Bush Administration to join in these negotiations. The Administration has refused to do so. The civilian leadership in the Pentagon has argued that no diplomatic progress on the Iranian nuclear threat will take place unless there is a credible threat of military action. “The neocons say negotiations are a bad deal,” a senior official of the International Atomic Energy Agency (I.A.E.A.) told me. “And the only thing the Iranians understand is pressure. And that they also need to be whacked.”

The core problem is that Iran has successfully hidden the extent of its nuclear program, and its progress. Many Western intelligence agencies, including those of the United States, believe that Iran is at least three to five years away from a capability to independently produce nuclear warheads -- although its work on a missile-delivery system is far more advanced. Iran is also widely believed by Western intelligence agencies and the I.A.E.A. to have serious technical problems with its weapons system, most notably in the production of the hexafluoride gas needed to fabricate nuclear warheads.

A retired senior C.I.A. official, one of many who left the agency recently, told me that he was familiar with the assessments, and confirmed that Iran is known to be having major difficulties in its weapons work. He also acknowledged that the agency’s timetable for a nuclear Iran matches the European estimates -- assuming that Iran gets no outside help. “The big wild card for us is that you don’t know who is capable of filling in the missing parts for them,” the recently retired official said. “North Korea? Pakistan? We don’t know what parts are missing.”

One Western diplomat told me that the Europeans believed they were in what he called a “lose-lose position” as long as the United States refuses to get involved. “France, Germany, and the U.K. cannot succeed alone, and everybody knows it,” the diplomat said. “If the U.S. stays outside, we don’t have enough leverage, and our effort will collapse.” The alternative would be to go to the Security Council, but any resolution imposing sanctions would likely be vetoed by China or Russia, and then “the United Nations will be blamed and the Americans will say, ‘The only solution is to bomb.’”

A European Ambassador noted that President Bush is scheduled to visit Europe in February, and that there has been public talk from the White House about improving the President’s relationship with America’s E.U. allies. In that context, the Ambassador told me, “I’m puzzled by the fact that the United States is not helping us in our program. How can Washington maintain its stance without seriously taking into account the weapons issue?”

The Israeli government is, not surprisingly, skeptical of the European approach. Silvan Shalom, the Foreign Minister, said in an interview last week in Jerusalem, with another *New Yorker* journalist, “I don’t like what’s happening. We were encouraged at first when the Europeans got involved. For a long time, they thought it was just Israel’s problem. But then they saw that the [Iranian] missiles themselves were longer range and

could reach all of Europe, and they became very concerned. Their attitude has been to use the carrot and the stick -- but all we see so far is the carrot.” He added, “If they can’t comply, Israel cannot live with Iran having a nuclear bomb.”

In a recent essay, Patrick Clawson, an Iran expert who is the deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (and a supporter of the Administration), articulated the view that force, or the threat of it, was a vital bargaining tool with Iran. Clawson wrote that if Europe wanted cooperation with the Bush Administration it “would do well to remind Iran that the military option remains on the table.” He added that the argument that the European negotiations hinged on Washington looked like “a preemptive excuse for the likely breakdown of the E.U.-Iranian talks.” In a subsequent conversation with me, Clawson suggested that, if some kind of military action was inevitable, “it would be much more in Israel’s interest -- and Washington’s -- to take covert action. The style of this Administration is to use overwhelming force -- ‘shock and awe.’ But we get only one bite of the apple.”

There are many military and diplomatic experts who dispute the notion that military action, on whatever scale, is the right approach. Shahram Chubin, an Iranian scholar who is the director of research at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, told me, “It’s a fantasy to think that there’s a good American or Israeli military option in Iran.” He went on, “The Israeli view is that this is an international problem. ‘You do it,’ they say to the West. ‘Otherwise, our Air Force will take care of it.’” In 1981, the Israeli Air Force destroyed Iraq’s Osirak reactor, setting its nuclear program back several years. But the situation now is both more complex and more dangerous, Chubin said. The Osirak bombing “drove the Iranian nuclear-weapons program underground, to hardened, dispersed sites,” he said. “You can’t be sure after an attack that you’ll get away with it. The U.S. and Israel would not be certain whether all the sites had been hit, or how quickly they’d be rebuilt. Meanwhile, they’d be waiting for an Iranian counter-attack that could be military or terrorist or diplomatic. Iran has long-range missiles and ties to Hezbollah, which has drones -- you can’t begin to think of what they’d do in response.”

Chubin added that Iran could also renounce the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. “It’s better to have them cheating within the system,” he said. “Otherwise, as victims, Iran will walk away from the treaty and inspections while the rest of the world watches the N.P.T. unravel before their eyes.”

The Administration has been conducting secret reconnaissance missions inside Iran at least since last summer. Much of the focus is on the accumulation of intelligence and targeting information on Iranian nuclear, chemical, and missile sites, both declared and suspected. The goal is to identify and isolate three dozen, and perhaps more, such targets that could be destroyed by precision strikes and short-term commando raids. “The civilians in the Pentagon want to go into Iran and destroy as much of the military infrastructure as possible,” the government consultant with close ties to the Pentagon told me.

Some of the missions involve extraordinary cooperation. For example, the former high-level intelligence official told me that an American commando task force has been set up in South Asia and is now working closely with a group of Pakistani scientists and technicians who had dealt with Iranian counterparts. (In 2003, the I.A.E.A. disclosed that Iran had been secretly receiving nuclear technology from Pakistan for more than a decade, and had withheld that information from inspectors.) The American task force, aided by the information from Pakistan, has been penetrating eastern Iran from Afghanistan in a hunt for underground installations. The task-force members, or their locally recruited agents, secreted remote detection devices -- known as sniffers -- capable of sampling the atmosphere for radioactive emissions and other evidence of nuclear-enrichment programs.

Getting such evidence is a pressing concern for the Bush Administration. The former high-level intelligence official told me, “They don’t want to make any W.M.D. intelligence mistakes, as in Iraq. The Republicans can’t have two of those. There’s no education in the second kick of a mule.” The official added that the government of Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani President, has won a high price for its cooperation --

American assurance that Pakistan will not have to hand over A. Q. Khan, known as the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, to the I.A.E.A. or to any other international authorities for questioning. For two decades, Khan has been linked to a vast consortium of nuclear-black-market activities. Last year, Musharraf professed to be shocked when Khan, in the face of overwhelming evidence, "confessed" to his activities. A few days later, Musharraf pardoned him, and so far he has refused to allow the I.A.E.A. or American intelligence to interview him. Khan is now said to be living under house arrest in a villa in Islamabad. "It's a deal -- a trade-off," the former high-level intelligence official explained. "'Tell us what you know about Iran and we will let your A. Q. Khan guys go.' It's the neoconservatives' version of short-term gain at long-term cost. They want to prove that Bush is the anti-terrorism guy who can handle Iran and the nuclear threat, against the long-term goal of eliminating the black market for nuclear proliferation."

The agreement comes at a time when Musharraf, according to a former high-level Pakistani diplomat, has authorized the expansion of Pakistan's nuclear-weapons arsenal. "Pakistan still needs parts and supplies, and needs to buy them in the clandestine market," the former diplomat said. "The U.S. has done nothing to stop it."

There has also been close, and largely unacknowledged, cooperation with Israel. The government consultant with ties to the Pentagon said that the Defense Department civilians, under the leadership of Douglas Feith, have been working with Israeli planners and consultants to develop and refine potential nuclear, chemical-weapons, and missile targets inside Iran. (After Osirak, Iran situated many of its nuclear sites in remote areas of the east, in an attempt to keep them out of striking range of other countries, especially Israel. Distance no longer lends such protection, however: Israel has acquired three submarines capable of launching cruise missiles and has equipped some of its aircraft with additional fuel tanks, putting Israeli F-16I fighters within the range of most Iranian targets.)

"They believe that about three-quarters of the potential targets can be destroyed from the air, and a quarter are too close to population centers, or buried too deep, to be targeted," the consultant said. Inevitably, he added, some suspicious sites need to be checked out by American or Israeli commando teams -- in on-the-ground surveillance -- before being targeted.

The Pentagon's contingency plans for a broader invasion of Iran are also being updated. Strategists at the headquarters of the U.S. Central Command, in Tampa, Florida, have been asked to revise the military's war plan, providing for a maximum ground and air invasion of Iran. Updating the plan makes sense, whether or not the Administration intends to act, because the geopolitics of the region have changed dramatically in the last three years. Previously, an American invasion force would have had to enter Iran by sea, by way of the Persian Gulf or the Gulf of Oman; now troops could move in on the ground, from Afghanistan or Iraq. Commando units and other assets could be introduced through new bases in the Central Asian republics.

It is possible that some of the American officials who talk about the need to eliminate Iran's nuclear infrastructure are doing so as part of a propaganda campaign aimed at pressuring Iran to give up its weapons planning. If so, the signals are not always clear. President Bush, who after 9/11 famously depicted Iran as a member of the "axis of evil," is now publicly emphasizing the need for diplomacy to run its course. "We don't have much leverage with the Iranians right now," the President said at a news conference late last year. "Diplomacy must be the first choice, and always the first choice of an administration trying to solve an issue of . . . nuclear armament. And we'll continue to press on diplomacy."

In my interviews over the past two months, I was given a much harsher view. The hawks in the Administration believe that it will soon become clear that the Europeans' negotiated approach cannot succeed, and that at that time the Administration will act. "We're not dealing with a set of National Security Council option papers here," the former high-level intelligence official told me. "They've already passed that wicket. It's not if we're going to do anything against Iran. They're doing it."

The immediate goals of the attacks would be to destroy, or at least temporarily derail, Iran's ability to go nuclear. But there are other, equally purposeful, motives at work. The government consultant told me that the hawks in the Pentagon, in private discussions, have been urging a limited attack on Iran because they believe it could lead to a toppling of the religious leadership. "Within the soul of Iran there is a struggle between secular nationalists and reformers, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the fundamentalist Islamic movement," the consultant told me. "The minute the aura of invincibility which the mullahs enjoy is shattered, and with it the ability to hoodwink the West, the Iranian regime will collapse" -- like the former Communist regimes in Romania, East Germany, and the Soviet Union. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz share that belief, he said.

"The idea that an American attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would produce a popular uprising is extremely ill-informed," said Flynt Leverett, a Middle East scholar who worked on the National Security Council in the Bush Administration. "You have to understand that the nuclear ambition in Iran is supported across the political spectrum, and Iranians will perceive attacks on these sites as attacks on their ambitions to be a major regional player and a modern nation that's technologically sophisticated." Leverett, who is now a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, at the Brookings Institution, warned that an American attack, if it takes place, "will produce an Iranian backlash against the United States and a rallying around the regime."

Rumsfeld planned and lobbied for more than two years before getting Presidential authority, in a series of findings and executive orders, to use military commandos for covert operations. One of his first steps was bureaucratic: to shift control of an undercover unit, known then as the Gray Fox (it has recently been given a new code name), from the Army to the Special Operations Command (SOCOM), in Tampa. Gray Fox was formally assigned to SOCOM in July, 2002, at the instigation of Rumsfeld's office, which meant that the undercover unit would have a single commander for administration and operational deployment. Then, last fall, Rumsfeld's ability to deploy the commandos expanded. According to a Pentagon consultant, an Executive Order on the Global War on Terrorism (referred to throughout the government as GWOT) was issued at Rumsfeld's direction. The order specifically authorized the military "to find and finish" terrorist targets, the consultant said. It included a target list that cited Al Qaeda network members, Al Qaeda senior leadership, and other high-value targets. The consultant said that the order had been cleared throughout the national-security bureaucracy in Washington.

In late November, 2004, the *Times* reported that Bush had set up an interagency group to study whether it "would best serve the nation" to give the Pentagon complete control over the C.I.A.'s own elite paramilitary unit, which has operated covertly in trouble spots around the world for decades. The panel's conclusions, due in February, are foregone, in the view of many former C.I.A. officers. "It seems like it's going to happen," Howard Hart, who was chief of the C.I.A.'s Paramilitary Operations Division before retiring in 1991, told me.

There was other evidence of Pentagon encroachment. Two former C.I.A. clandestine officers, Vince Cannistraro and Philip Giraldi, who publish *Intelligence Brief*, a newsletter for their business clients, reported last month on the existence of a broad counter-terrorism Presidential finding that permitted the Pentagon "to operate unilaterally in a number of countries where there is a perception of a clear and evident terrorist threat. . . . A number of the countries are friendly to the U.S. and are major trading partners. Most have been cooperating in the war on terrorism." The two former officers listed some of the countries -- Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Malaysia. (I was subsequently told by the former high-level intelligence official that Tunisia is also on the list.)

Giraldi, who served three years in military intelligence before joining the C.I.A., said that he was troubled by the military's expanded covert assignment. "I don't think they can handle the cover," he told me. "They've got to have a different mind-set. They've got to handle new roles and get into foreign cultures and learn how

other people think. If you're going into a village and shooting people, it doesn't matter," Giraldi added. "But if you're running operations that involve finesse and sensitivity, the military can't do it. Which is why these kind of operations were always run out of the agency." I was told that many Special Operations officers also have serious misgivings.

Rumsfeld and two of his key deputies, Stephen Cambone, the Under-secretary of Defense for Intelligence, and Army Lieutenant General William G. (Jerry) Boykin, will be part of the chain of command for the new commando operations. Relevant members of the House and Senate intelligence committees have been briefed on the Defense Department's expanded role in covert affairs, a Pentagon adviser assured me, but he did not know how extensive the briefings had been.

"I'm conflicted about the idea of operating without congressional oversight," the Pentagon adviser said. "But I've been told that there will be oversight down to the specific operation." A second Pentagon adviser agreed, with a significant caveat. "There are reporting requirements," he said. "But to execute the finding we don't have to go back and say, 'We're going here and there.' No nitty-gritty detail and no micromanagement."

The legal questions about the Pentagon's right to conduct covert operations without informing Congress have not been resolved. "It's a very, very gray area," said Jeffrey H. Smith, a West Point graduate who served as the C.I.A.'s general counsel in the mid-nineteen-nineties. "Congress believes it voted to include all such covert activities carried out by the armed forces. The military says, 'No, the things we're doing are not intelligence actions under the statute but necessary military steps authorized by the President, as Commander-in-Chief, to 'prepare the battlefield.''" Referring to his days at the C.I.A., Smith added, "We were always careful not to use the armed forces in a covert action without a Presidential finding. The Bush Administration has taken a much more aggressive stance."

In his conversation with me, Smith emphasized that he was unaware of the military's current plans for expanding covert action. But he said, "Congress has always worried that the Pentagon is going to get us involved in some military misadventure that nobody knows about."

Under Rumsfeld's new approach, I was told, U.S. military operatives would be permitted to pose abroad as corrupt foreign businessmen seeking to buy contraband items that could be used in nuclear-weapons systems. In some cases, according to the Pentagon advisers, local citizens could be recruited and asked to join up with guerrillas or terrorists. This could potentially involve organizing and carrying out combat operations, or even terrorist activities. Some operations will likely take place in nations in which there is an American diplomatic mission, with an Ambassador and a C.I.A. station chief, the Pentagon consultant said. The Ambassador and the station chief would not necessarily have a need to know, under the Pentagon's current interpretation of its reporting requirement.

The new rules will enable the Special Forces community to set up what it calls "action teams" in the target countries overseas which can be used to find and eliminate terrorist organizations. "Do you remember the right-wing execution squads in El Salvador?" the former high-level intelligence official asked me, referring to the military-led gangs that committed atrocities in the early nineteen-eighties. "We founded them and we financed them," he said. "The objective now is to recruit locals in any area we want. And we aren't going to tell Congress about it." A former military officer, who has knowledge of the Pentagon's commando capabilities, said, "We're going to be riding with the bad boys."

One of the rationales for such tactics was spelled out in a series of articles by John Arquilla, a professor of defense analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School, in Monterey, California, and a consultant on terrorism for the RAND corporation. "It takes a network to fight a network," Arquilla wrote in a recent article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

“When conventional military operations and bombing failed to defeat the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya in the 1950s, the British formed teams of friendly Kikuyu tribesmen who went about pretending to be terrorists. These ‘pseudo gangs,’ as they were called, swiftly threw the Mau Mau on the defensive, either by befriending and then ambushing bands of fighters or by guiding bombers to the terrorists’ camps. What worked in Kenya a half-century ago has a wonderful chance of undermining trust and recruitment among today’s terror networks. Forming new pseudo gangs should not be difficult.

“If a confused young man from Marin County can join up with Al Qaeda,” Arquilla wrote, referring to John Walker Lindh, the twenty-year-old Californian who was seized in Afghanistan, “think what professional operatives might do.”

A few pilot covert operations were conducted last year, one Pentagon adviser told me, and a terrorist cell in Algeria was “rolled up” with American help. The adviser was referring, apparently, to the capture of Ammari Saifi, known as Abderrezak le Para, the head of a North African terrorist network affiliated with Al Qaeda. But at the end of the year there was no agreement within the Defense Department about the rules of engagement. “The issue is approval for the final authority,” the former high-level intelligence official said. “Who gets to say ‘Get this’ or ‘Do this’?”

A retired four-star general said, “The basic concept has always been solid, but how do you insure that the people doing it operate within the concept of the law? This is pushing the edge of the envelope.” The general added, “It’s the oversight. And you’re not going to get Warner” -- John Warner, of Virginia, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee -- “and those guys to exercise oversight. This whole thing goes to the Fourth Deck.” He was referring to the floor in the Pentagon where Rumsfeld and Cambone have their offices.

“It’s a finesse to give power to Rumsfeld -- giving him the right to act swiftly, decisively, and lethally,” the first Pentagon adviser told me. “It’s a global free-fire zone.”

The Pentagon has tried to work around the limits on covert activities before. In the early nineteen-eighties, a covert Army unit was set up and authorized to operate overseas with minimal oversight. The results were disastrous. The Special Operations program was initially known as Intelligence Support Activity, or I.S.A., and was administered from a base near Washington (as was, later, Gray Fox). It was established soon after the failed rescue, in April, 1980, of the American hostages in Iran, who were being held by revolutionary students after the Islamic overthrow of the Shah’s regime. At first, the unit was kept secret from many of the senior generals and civilian leaders in the Pentagon, as well as from many members of Congress. It was eventually deployed in the Reagan Administration’s war against the Sandinista government, in Nicaragua. It was heavily committed to supporting the Contras. By the mid-eighties, however, the I.S.A.’s operations had been curtailed, and several of its senior officers were courtmartialled following a series of financial scandals, some involving arms deals. The affair was known as “the Yellow Fruit scandal,” after the code name given to one of the I.S.A.’s cover organizations -- and in many ways the group’s procedures laid the groundwork for the Iran-Contra scandal.

Despite the controversy surrounding Yellow Fruit, the I.S.A. was kept intact as an undercover unit by the Army. “But we put so many restrictions on it,” the second Pentagon adviser said. “In I.S.A., if you wanted to travel fifty miles you had to get a special order. And there were certain areas, such as Lebanon, where they could not go.” The adviser acknowledged that the current operations are similar to those two decades earlier, with similar risks -- and, as he saw it, similar reasons for taking the risks. “What drove them then, in terms of Yellow Fruit, was that they had no intelligence on Iran,” the adviser told me. “They had no knowledge of Tehran and no people on the ground who could prepare the battle space.”

Rumsfeld’s decision to revive this approach stemmed, once again, from a failure of intelligence in the



Middle East, the adviser said. The Administration believed that the C.I.A. was unable, or unwilling, to provide the military with the information it needed to effectively challenge stateless terrorism. "One of the big challenges was that we didn't have Humint" -- human intelligence -- "collection capabilities in areas where terrorists existed," the adviser told me. "Because the C.I.A. claimed to have such a hold on Humint, the way to get around them, rather than take them on, was to claim that the agency didn't do Humint to support Special Forces operations overseas. The C.I.A. fought it." Referring to Rumsfeld's new authority for covert operations, the first Pentagon adviser told me, "It's not empowering military intelligence. It's emasculating the C.I.A."

A former senior C.I.A. officer depicted the agency's eclipse as predictable. "For years, the agency bent over backward to integrate and coordinate with the Pentagon," the former officer said. "We just caved and caved and got what we deserved. It is a fact of life today that the Pentagon is a five-hundred-pound gorilla and the C.I.A. director is a chimpanzee."

There was pressure from the White House, too. A former C.I.A. clandestine-services officer told me that, in the months after the resignation of the agency's director George Tenet, in June, 2004, the White House began "coming down critically" on analysts in the C.I.A.'s Directorate of Intelligence (D.I.) and demanded "to see more support for the Administration's political position." Porter Goss, Tenet's successor, engaged in what the recently retired C.I.A. official described as a "political purge" in the D.I. Among the targets were a few senior analysts who were known to write dissenting papers that had been forwarded to the White House. The recently retired C.I.A. official said, "The White House carefully reviewed the political analyses of the D.I. so they could sort out the apostates from the true believers." Some senior analysts in the D.I. have turned in their resignations -- quietly, and without revealing the extent of the disarray.

The White House solidified its control over intelligence last month, when it forced last-minute changes in the intelligence-reform bill. The legislation, based substantially on recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, originally gave broad powers, including authority over intelligence spending, to a new national-intelligence director. (The Pentagon controls roughly eighty per cent of the intelligence budget.) A reform bill passed in the Senate by a vote of 96-2. Before the House voted, however, Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld balked. The White House publicly supported the legislation, but House Speaker Dennis Hastert refused to bring a House version of the bill to the floor for a vote -- ostensibly in defiance of the President, though it was widely understood in Congress that Hastert had been delegated to stall the bill. After intense White House and Pentagon lobbying, the legislation was rewritten. The bill that Congress approved sharply reduced the new director's power, in the name of permitting the Secretary of Defense to maintain his "statutory responsibilities." Fred Kaplan, in the online magazine Slate, described the real issues behind Hastert's action, quoting a congressional aide who expressed amazement as White House lobbyists bashed the Senate bill and came up "with all sorts of ludicrous reasons why it was unacceptable."

"Rummy's plan was to get a compromise in the bill in which the Pentagon keeps its marbles and the C.I.A. loses theirs," the former high-level intelligence official told me. "Then all the pieces of the puzzle fall in place. He gets authority for covert action that is not attributable, the ability to directly task national-intelligence assets" -- including the many intelligence satellites that constantly orbit the world.

"Rumsfeld will no longer have to refer anything through the government's intelligence wringer," the former official went on. "The intelligence system was designed to put competing agencies in competition. What's missing will be the dynamic tension that insures everyone's priorities -- in the C.I.A., the D.O.D., the F.B.I., and even the Department of Homeland Security -- are discussed. The most insidious implication of the new system is that Rumsfeld no longer has to tell people what he's doing so they can ask, 'Why are you doing this?' or 'What are your priorities?' Now he can keep all of the mattress mice out of it."

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