Bush's plan to spend away the terror

by Simon Tisdall via rialator - The Guardian *Tuesday, Oct 23 2007, 11:22pm*
international / peace/war / other press

> Planned US spending on the "global war on terror" is set to rise sharply in the coming year despite claims by President George Bush that al-Qaida is on the run in Iraq. A funding request sent to Congress this week seeks $196.4bn (£95.8bn) for counter-terrorism in 2007-8, $25bn up on this year. The Pentagon's separate budget request amounts to an additional $481.4bn.

Justifying these whopping increases, Mr Bush repeats a favourite mantra that "America is safer but not yet safe", implying that absolute safety is attainable at some point in the future. In a speech this week, Vice-President Dick Cheney was franker. He said the US was engaged in an ideological struggle amounting to war without end.

Details of the spending request reveal how the war is steadily expanding in terms of aims and geography. Iraq and Afghanistan apart, counter-terror funds are earmarked for US allies in Pakistan and Palestine, for de-nuclearising North Korea, and for fighting drug cartels in Mexico and Central America.

Further escalation came this year with the Pentagon's creation of Africa Command, tasked with tracking down militant Islamists from Somalia to the Maghreb and the Sahel. Mr Cheney says the threat is ubiquitous and pressing. "The extremists in the Middle East... are trying to seize power by force, keep power by intimidation, and build an empire of fear."

Critics say fear is also being used to keep American citizens and taxpayers in line. Unveiling the updated National Strategy for Homeland Security this month, the White House claimed, without producing new evidence, that al-Qaida was actively trying to infiltrate the US.

"Although we have discovered only a handful of individuals in the US with ties to al-Qaida senior leadership, the group likely will intensify its efforts to place operatives here in the homeland," the report said.

The assessment appeared at odds with statements by US commanders and Pentagon planners that the al-Qaida network has been "significantly degraded" in Iraq and elsewhere. But fearfulness is catching. Sir Ian Blair, the British Metropolitan police commissioner, warned Britons this month that the number and scale of terrorist conspiracies and conspirators was increasing, even though fewer cases were actually under investigation.

Experts in international security law such as Philip Bobbitt of Columbia Law School, New York, deny suggestions the global threat is being exaggerated and conflated for political and geo-strategic ends. Speaking in London, Professor Bobbitt said three overlapping, truly global wars on terror were being waged. One was the fight against "21st century networked terror"; the second was a war to prevent rogue regimes or terror groups obtaining weapons of mass destruction; the third was against genocide and ethnic cleansing, as in Darfur.

But other influential voices are increasingly questioning the purpose and the conduct of terrorism

policy, suggesting it will not outlive the Bush era. Syndicated columnist William Pfaff wrote recently that fear generated by the 9/11 attacks had been externalised, with official and rightwing media connivance, "into paranoid fantasy of foreign enemies". Terrorism had become almost anything the Bush administration said it was. And in an interview with GuardianAmerica yesterday, Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton suggested Mr Bush's for-us-or-agin'-us approach was self-defeating.

"We've got to do a better job of clarifying what are the motivations of terrorists," Ms Clinton said. "I think one of our mistakes has been painting with such a broad brush, which has not been particularly helpful in understanding what it is we were up against."

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman of King's College said Mr Bush had consistently failed to define what he meant by the "global war on terror". There were many forms of terrorist, including jihadis, Hamas, the IRA, and state terrorism of the kind practised by Stalin or Burma's generals, he said in a recent discussion.

US presidents were over-fond of declaring war on phenomena, such as drugs or poverty and now terror. "An enemy can surrender but phenomena cannot," Prof Freedman said. Mr Bush should spend more time "thinking about who we're fighting and why".

In a new book published in the US, Less Safe, Less Free: Why America is Losing the War on Terror, David Cole and Jules Lobel argue that Mr Bush's catch-all, bulldozer approach has increased worldwide hostility to the US and its citizens, dismayed minority communities at home, alienated America's friends and emboldened its enemies.

While the military had gained bumper budgets, the American nation had forfeited moral legitimacy, they say. "The resentment provoked by these measures is the greatest threat to our national security and the most likely source of the next attack." For that reason if no other, any Bush successor would have to change tack.

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