

Media's early warning system was switched off

By Philip Smucker

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Who would have believed after Osama bin Laden's heinous attack on American soil thirty-one months ago, that the Saudi's terror network would be offering a "truce" to Europe and expanding his operations across the globe? Or, who would have believed – even last year this time – that Iraq would be a magnet for jihadists from across the Middle East and that American servicemen would be fighting street to street?

Go figure.

Well, actually, some folks did figure. Indeed, looking back over the last three years, there is a strong case to make for doubting the optimists and listening more closely to the pessimists.

On May 30, 2001, in the lead into the "Summer of threat" that culminated in the 9/11 attacks, the Washington Post's own intelligence beat reporter, Vernon Loeb, flagged the Justice Department's guilty verdicts against four bin Laden associates as part of an American anti-terror plan that was working.

"U.S. counterterrorism officials credit that strategy with the isolation of bin Laden in the desolate mountains of Afghanistan, the arrests of many of his operatives around the world and the prevention of numerous attacks. . . " wrote Loeb in a piece with Alan Sipress.

That was the optimistic view. Indeed, a spot check of both the Washington Post and The New York Times archives during the "2001 Summer of threat" turns up a virtual blank when it comes to reporting devoted to the mischief that bin Laden might be planning in the "desolate mountains of Afghanistan."

When Senator Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.) returned from a six-country tour of the Persian Gulf on June 26, 2001, the Post highlighted his trip with the headline: "U.S. has bin Laden 'On the Run.'"

About bin Laden, Shelby told Mr. Loeb, who was also writing a widely-read intelligence column at the time that, "He knows he's hunted, and he's not exactly strolling down the

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streets of London or Paris or Berlin, shopping.”

Loeb was clearly somewhat dubious of Shelby's odd claims, as he made clear in the same column: “It's not always easy to understand how (US officials think they are winning the war,) since bin Laden and other Islamic fundamentalists clearly have the U.S. military on edge.”

Still, Loeb and his fellow security and intelligence writers clearly never convinced the Post's senior editors of the need to hammer at this story on a daily basis.

Even now as the American press keeps a close eye on the lack of foresight in the government that led to the 9/11 attacks, there remains little examination of how most news organizations failed to notice the imminent threat posed by bin Laden.

On January 4th, 2002, the New York Times' experienced foreign correspondent, Serge Schmemmann, authored a story from the United Nations in New York titled: “If Saddam Hussein is Next, Experts Say, do it Fast.”

The lead points out that “experts agree, much of the reaction in the Arab world and elsewhere could be mitigated if the operation were quick.”

The story quotes James R. Schlesinger, defense secretary in the Nixon and Ford administrations, as saying that the ouster of Hussein “would transform the strategic map of the Middle East,” but for that to happen would require “efficiency and high confidence.”

Further down in the same story, Graham Allison, director of the Belfer Center at Harvard University, injects a note of skepticism into the increasingly militant debate, telling Schmemmann that, “The only argument against getting rid of Saddam is nobody knows how to do it, or the cost of doing it.” (American taxpayers might be interested to know that many news organizations were still highlighting the views of Bush Administration hawk Paul Wolfowitz on his notion that Iraq's oil revenues could fund the country's transition to democracy. Nearly 130 billion dollars later, we now know how wrong he was.)

Though the idea that a pre-emptive U.S.-led invasion of Iraq without broad allied support would stir up a “hornet's nest” in the Middle East had begun to get play in opinion columns and was espoused by experts as prominent as Madeleine Albright, little of this view showed up in daily news reports before the war.

In truth, a major contingent within the U.S. State Department and the CIA had been ready and willing to discuss the many downsides of a possible invasion of Iraq, albeit often on “background” or “off the record.” One CIA source, the CIA's own chief of the agency's elite “bin Laden unit” until 1999, who had written a book, “Through Our Enemies Eyes,” under the name “Anonymous,” was more than happy to talk to the press - under his usual pseudonym — about his own fears of the Bush Administration's hawkish plans.

Outside terror experts were also talking. Rohan Gunaratna, the author of “Inside Al

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Qaeda” told me in a story I wrote for the Christian Science Monitor in the days leading up to the war that Al Qaeda would “gain far more regional Arab support in the case that the US leads a war against Iraq, particularly if it is without a UN Security Council mandate.”

About the same time, Charles Heyman, editor of the London-based Jane's World Armies warned of “a real possibility that an occupation of this nature will suck in all sorts of Jihadis from all over,” adding that, “A Western occupation almost certainly invites them in from Saudi Arabia and other countries where they are currently ensconced.”

These prescient “expert” admonitions of a major troubles ahead were far more serious in tone to the glib lines that Wolfowitz was espousing. Example: “There's every reason to think that huge numbers of the Iraqi population are going to welcome (us) provided we don't overstay our welcome.”

As speculation on U.S. attack plans made the front pages, the press corps often overlooked the Bush Administration's complete lack of planning for the aftermath of its invasion.

Now that the situation in Iraq is moving from good, to much, much worse, it might be instructive to have all the optimists lined up against one wall and all the pessimists against another just so the Fourth Estate, which should not exclude itself from the line-up, can take toll of recent oversights.

On April 1, 2003, as Baghdad tumbled into American military control, Ken Adelman, a regular news source and a former arms control director in the Reagan Administration, jumped up to holler that he had been right all along with his low estimates of the number of troops needed for a successful invasion of Iraq. Indeed, in February of that year he had predicted that U.S. forces would enjoy “a cakewalk” in Iraq.

Adelman, no “quiet American” was feeling confident in his predictions at the time. He wrote a column on the Washington Post opinion page titled: “Cakewalk' Revisited” in which he boasted about his earlier optimistic predictions: “Administration critics should feel shock over their bellyaching about the wayward war plan. All of us feel awe over the professionalism and power of the U.S. military. Now we know.”

What a difference a year makes.

In retrospect, maybe we in the American press corps, concerned about remaining “fair and balanced,” are to blame for the rush to war in Iraq. Rather than try to neatly balance our healthy skepticism with the optimistic statements from “experts” and persons in authority, we should seek out the pessimists in advance and on a far more regular basis.

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