

“Take-over-the-World Plan.”: Key Pentagon strategist plots global war on terror

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Theme: [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Global Research, December 30, 2007

The Washington Post 30 December 2007

WASHINGTON — In the Pentagon’s newly expanded Special Operations office, Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Vickers is working to implement the U.S. military’s highest-priority plan: a global campaign against terrorism that reaches far beyond Iraq and Afghanistan.

The plan details the targeting of al-Qaida-affiliated networks around the world and explores how the United States should retaliate in case of another major terrorist attack. The most critical aspect of the plan, Vickers said in a recent interview, involves U.S. Special Operations forces working through foreign partners to uproot and fight terrorist groups.

Expansive plan

Vickers’ job also spans the modernization of nuclear forces for deterrence and retaliation, and the retooling of conventional forces to combat terrorism, a portfolio so expansive that he and some Pentagon officials once jokingly referred to his efforts as the “take-over-the-world plan.”

Vickers, a former Green Beret and CIA operative, was the principal strategist for the biggest covert program in CIA history: the paramilitary operation that drove the Soviet army out of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The movie “Charlie Wilson’s War,” released last weekend, portrays Vickers in that role, in which he directed an insurgent force of 150,000 Afghan fighters and controlled an annual budget of more than \$2 billion in current dollars.

Today, as the top Pentagon adviser on counterterrorism strategy, Vickers exudes the same assurance about defeating terrorist groups as he did as a 31-year-old CIA paramilitary officer assigned to Afghanistan, where he convinced superiors that, with the right strategy and weapons, the ragtag Afghan insurgents could win.

“I am just as confident or more confident we can prevail in the war on terror,” said Vickers, 54.

Vickers joined the Pentagon in July to oversee the 54,000-strong Special Operations Command (Socom), based in Tampa, Fla., which is growing faster than any other part of the U.S. military. Socom’s budget has doubled in recent years, to \$6 billion for 2008, and the command is to add 13,000 troops to its ranks by 2011.

Senior Pentagon and military officials regard Vickers as a rarity: a skilled strategist who is creative and pragmatic. "He tends to think like a gangster," said Jim Thomas, a former senior defense planner who worked with Vickers.

Vickers' outlook was shaped in the CIA and Special Forces, which he joined in 1973. In the 10th Special Forces Group, he trained year-round for a guerrilla war against the Soviet Union. One scenario he prepared for: to parachute into enemy territory with a small nuclear weapon strapped to his leg and position it to halt the Red Army.

Vickers recalled that the nuclear devices did not seem that small, "particularly when you are in an aircraft with one of them or it is attached to your body." Was it a suicide mission? "I certainly hoped not," Vickers said.

An expert in martial arts, parachuting and weapons, and second in his class at Officer Candidate School, Vickers joined the CIA's paramilitary unit in 1983. Soon after, he received a citation for combat in Grenada.

His greatest influence was in the precise way he reassessed the potential of Afghan guerrilla forces and prescribed the right mix of weaponry to attack Soviet weaknesses.

Today Vickers' plan to build a global counterterrorist network is no less ambitious. The plan is focused on a list of 20 "high-priority" countries, with Pakistan posing a central preoccupation for Vickers, who said al-Qaida sanctuaries in the country's western tribal areas are a serious threat to the United States.

Building network

The list also includes Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the Philippines, Yemen, Somalia and Iran, and Vickers hinted that some European countries could be on it. Beyond that, the plan covers 29 additional "priority" countries, and "other countries" he did not name.

"It's not just the Middle East. It's not just the developing world. It's not just nondemocratic countries; it's a global problem," he said. "Threats can emanate from Denmark, the United Kingdom, you name it."

Vickers, who has advised President Bush on Iraq strategy, is convinced that more U.S. troops are not enough to solve the conflict in Iraq and that working with local forces is the best long-term strategy for Iraq and Afghanistan.

Working with proxy forces also will enable the United States to extend and sustain its influence, something it failed to do in Afghanistan, he said. "After this great victory and after a million Afghans died, we basically exited that region and Afghanistan just spun into chaos," he said.

"It's imperative that we not do that again," he said.

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