

Eye way off the ball

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

We are fighting them there so we don't have to fight them here. That's been the Bush administration's spiel since the Iraq invasion in 2003.

Five years later, Michael McConnell, the director of national intelligence, told the Senate that al-Qaida is gaining strength and improving its ability to strike at the United States again. In plain English: While we've been creating terrorists and a dandy cause for terrorist recruitment in Iraq, we forwent the knockout punch to al-Qaida in Afghanistan - where the Taliban is resurgent and the central government still ineffectual - and have seen the terrorists rebuild in Pakistan, a U.S. ally.

Of course, that's not how McConnell put it. He noted that al-Qaida has suffered blows in Iraq - where the organization was virtually nonexistent before the invasion - but it, too, is looking at branching out from Iraq.

In plainer English: We were diverted from the campaign of necessity - against terror globally - because we became mired in a war of choice, from which extrication will prove difficult for any president, Republican or Democrat.

McConnell told the Senate Intelligence Committee that wanted-dead-or-alive Osama bin Laden is very much alive and, with deputy Ayman al-Zawahri, still in charge. They've replaced lost lieutenants, and al-Qaida is improving "the last key aspect of its ability to attack the U.S." That would be recruiting militants, Westerners among them, who can walk among us to kill us.

The U.S. is now asking the government of Pervez Musharraf for the power to more aggressively combat terrorists operating in Pakistan's tribal areas. Good.

President Bush is also, however, refusing to talk rationally about an exit for a war in Iraq that has stretched this country's military capability to the breaking point.

This issue very much needs to get a proper discussion in the current presidential campaign.

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