

"Combating Terrorism in Saudi Arabia"
Secretary of Defense William J. Perry
Prepared Statement
Senate Armed Services Committee
Washington, D.C.
July 9, 1996

Perry. Mr. Chairman. The US military is a family. We have just lost 19 members of our family, and we feel their loss deeply. But we must carry on the mission they were conducting. And we must learn from this tragic event and establish measures to provide better protection for our forces. There is no issue that I feel more deeply about or no task that I work at harder than the safety and the welfare of our military personnel. In pursuing that task, I have always had the full support of the committee, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you today.

In February of 1993 when I came before you as the president's nominee for the position of secretary of defense, I said, "The secretary of defense has the responsibility to oversee the Joint Staff and the CinCs [commanders-in-chiefs] in their direction of military operations. If I am confirmed as secretary, I pledge to give first priority to reviewing and assessing war plans and deployment orders, and I pledge to provide the required support to CinCs as they direct our forces in the field."

After that hearing, you confirmed me in my position and to the best of my ability, I have carried out the promise that I made to you and to the American people. A critically important component in the oversight of military operations is ensuring appropriate force protection. The responsibility for the safety of our military men and women is mine, and I expect to be held accountable for carrying out that responsibility.

I carry out the responsibility for the safety of our military personnel in four ways:

By making judgments on whether the missions we assign our military personnel are worth the risk of casualties. I manifest this responsibility every time I sign a deployment order.

By judging the competence of our senior commanders--especially those who lead our unified commands--the four-star generals and admirals whom I recommend to the president and that you confirm for leadership of our deployed forces.

By making clear policy statements regarding the priority of our missions. I sign off on each mission statement, which includes the policy on force protection for that mission.

And by visiting our forces in the field to make judgments as to how our commanders are executing their missions, with special emphasis on force protection.

In my testimony today I will describe in more detail how I carry out these four responsibilities and specifically how they applied to protection of our forces in Saudi Arabia.

My first responsibility is to decide whether a proposed mission is worth the risk of American lives. No responsibility weighs more heavily upon me. I have articulated to you on numerous occasions my belief that when our vital national interests are at stake, we must be prepared to use military force, even at the risk of casualties.

While such a judgment may be thought of as a risk/benefit analysis, for me it is much more personal. I make such judgments every week when I sign operational deployment orders, I made such a judgment when I deployed our forces to Bosnia---in the face of forecasts that our forces would be met with fierce armed resistance. I made such a judgment after the bombing of the Saudi National Guard facility in Riyadh, when I reconfirmed that the mission our forces are carrying out in the [Persian] gulf region is in our vital national interest.

This reconfirmation should come as no surprise to this committee. In every statement I have made on this subject, I have made clear my belief that the security and stability of the gulf region ranks as a vital national interest for the United States. That judgment has been US national policy since the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt.

The gulf is the world's energy storehouse, home to two-thirds of the globe's proven oil reserves. At the same time, it is a volatile region. It is the reason we fought in Desert Storm and the reason we sent forces to deter Saddam's [Hussein] threatened aggression in October of 1994.

Because the gulf region is so important to us and because it is so volatile, we have developed a several-part strategy to preserve the security and stability of the region:

We maintain a significant presence in the region, including air power at host national bases and naval power on our ships in the gulf and the Arabian Sea.

We maintain pre-positioned equipment in the region--a brigade's worth of heavy armor in Kuwait, another brigade's worth of equipment afloat and an additional brigade's worth of equipment going into Qatar.

We maintain lift capability that can get our forces to the gulf quickly if needed.

And we maintain access agreements with the countries in the region and we regularly train with them to help build up their own capabilities.

Our military presence in the gulf region serves as a deterrence to rogue nations by reminding them that the US will fight to defend our vital interests in the region. If deterrence fails, our military presence becomes the base on which we quickly build our fighting force, thereby ensuring a rapid military victory with minimum casualties.

I believe that our military presence in the region is essential to protect our vital national interests and carry out our strategy. We must not allow ourselves to be driven out by terrorists. That would not only reward and encourage terrorism, it would jeopardize our ability to defend our vital national interests.

The second way I carry out my responsibility for the safety of our personnel is to make judgments about who is best qualified to lead our military forces. The chairman is the key military adviser to me and to the president. I have enormous confidence in Gen. [John M.] Shalikashvili, and this judgment led me to recommend him for reappointment to a second term as chairman.

The CinCs of the unified commands are the key leaders who direct our troops in combat and in the daily operations that are most likely to take them into harm's way. The CinCs must be warfighters of great experience and sound military judgment. Often they must also be diplomats, but most of all the CinCs must be leaders--commanders with the ability and will to make the tough calls when we hand them the mission of protecting America's interests and carrying out our military strategies.

I made this judgment about military leadership when I recommended our current commander in chief of the Central Command, [Gen. J.H.] Binford Peay, for his position. The commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Desert Storm, a veteran of two tours in Vietnam, Gen. Peay probably has more combat command experience than any Army officer currently on active duty. He is a warfighter, a strategist and a diplomat. Our nation is fortunate to have a military leader of his ability in such a critical position.

The third way I carry out my responsibility for the safety of our personnel is by setting clear policy direction. That is the role for civilian leadership. We then rely on the military experts to make the plans and take the concrete steps to carry out those policies. For example, working with military advisers, civilians set the tasks for IFOR [implementation force] in Bosnia, but the military leaders determined the specific plans and activities that are carrying out those tasks. All of you who have visited our troops in the field know well how those operations and corresponding plans devolve downward until they reach the platoon and squad level, where each unit has its piece of carrying out the overall plan.

One of the missions for all of our operations is force protection. Every military plan must make this a priority. It is an inherent part of every operation and a basic responsibility of our commanders. Whether for training or operational deployments, commanders issue clear guidance on force protection and specify the applicable rules of engagement for each situation.

Sometimes force protection is a relatively easy task, but it must never be taken lightly, no matter how benign the environment. When troops are in any operation involving risk of combat or high threat from terrorism, force protection becomes critical and complex. Our commanders integrate anti-terrorism awareness training into military training at all levels. In the case of deployed personnel, the training is very specific as to the nature of the threat and the responsibilities of each soldier, airman, sailor or Marine.

Some critics scoff at the stringent rules by which we protect our forces in Bosnia--one full company assigned to guard duty for each battalion, convoys of four vehicles minimum, no alcohol consumption while in theater, flak jackets, helmets and weapons when outside secure compounds--but these are keys to force protection. I gave the order that I wanted force protection to be a priority, and Maj. Gen. [William] Nash determined that in his operating environment, these were key rules. I reviewed those rules when I visited him last week, and I fully support his decision to maintain such stringent measures.

Our operations in Southwest Asia take place in a uniquely difficult environment. Our pilots face daily risks over Iraq and must operate at peak performance. Our personnel using Saudi facilities may not face mines, but they must operate in a difficult cultural terrain. And they face a severe threat from terrorism.

We have long understood that terrorism is an insidious scourge that must be fought aggressively and with eternal vigilance. But today this threat is becoming even more complex and difficult to counter as old and new bad actors take advantage of weak governments in newly independent states, new technologies and rekindled ethnic rivalries. The Arabian Peninsula was long an island of relative calm in the midst of regional tensions. That is no longer true.

The Khobar Towers bombing has had a singular effect on the Saudi government. The king and his advisers now understand, I believe, that they are dealing with a threat that affects not only the regime itself, but also their culture, traditions and honor. We have understood the complexity of the terrorist threat for some time, but to the Saudis it is a relatively new phenomenon. We must help them appreciate the challenge by sharing intelligence and our knowledge of terrorist methods. We must never accept any loss with complacency, but we must also be realistic about the challenge. Every measure we take makes the work of the terrorist harder, but it does not make it impossible.

Terrorists always strike the weak link in our chain of defenses. Our goal must be to try to find and strengthen those weak spots first with what I call "passive defenses"--guards, barriers, fences, etc. But passive measures are not enough. We must increase our "active defenses" by getting better at gathering intelligence so that we can pre-empt or disrupt terrorist operations before they can come to fruition.

We must also work cooperatively with other governments, in this case the Saudis. After I visited with our troops in Dhahran last week, I flew with Gen. Peay to Jeddah, where we met with Minister of Defense Sultan [bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud], who pledged his full cooperation and determination to find and punish the perpetrators.

I then expected to meet with Crown Prince Abdullah, but instead I was asked to meet with King Fahd. The king received me with the crown prince, Minister of Defense Sultan, Minister of Interior Nayif [bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud] and Foreign Minister Saud [al-Faysal bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud]. I would note that we were the first official Americans to meet with the king since his illness last November.

We have read many media accounts about the state of the king's health. I can only tell you what I observed. The king was fully in control of the meeting. He met with me late in the evening for over an hour and then with his senior officials for an additional two hours.

In addition to expressing deep sympathy at our loss, he made absolutely clear his determination to bring the perpetrators to justice. He also emphasized to everyone in the room that he expected full cooperation between the Saudi and US investigators. I explained to the Saudi leadership our assessment of how serious the threat was and the importance of making significant changes in the security measures for our forces.

The fourth way I carry out my responsibility for the safety of our personnel is by getting out to the field and visiting with troops and commanders. Through this practice, I get the confidence I need to make decisions that put people at risk. I see and hear how the commanders and troops understand the goals and policies I have set. I reassure myself that the tasks that I have set them are both worth the risks and doable with the forces committed. I talk to the political leadership of the countries where our troops are deployed and get a sense for myself of the operational environment. And I look at how our troops are protecting themselves.

I made three trips to Haiti during that operation. I have visited with our troops who are now in Bosnia four times, including once during their train-up period to get a firsthand look at their preparation. I was with them just after they bridged the Sava River, and I just returned from a visit with them over the Fourth of July. They understand their mission, and they are accomplishing it brilliantly.

I have made four trips to Southwest Asia, stopping each time in Saudi Arabia to visit with our forces and the political leaders. My third trip, in early January of this year, gave me the opportunity to make my own firsthand assessment following the bombing at the Saudi National Guard facility. During that visit, I re-emphasized that the first priority must be force protection. I also re-evaluated the mission of our forces in the region--the risks, the costs and the impact on operational tempo against the goals and benefits.

It is clear in retrospect that the actions we took to respond to the threat were not adequate to deal with the attack that actually occurred. But I still conclude now, as I did then, that this mission continues to be of vital importance to the United States.

I made another such visit last week. I went to Saudi Arabia to see for myself the results of the attack, to determine how we should respond to it and also to learn first-hand how our people had reacted. I found the troops sobered by the events of the preceding days, but their morale was strong. They clearly understand the importance of their mission and the role they fulfill in this important endeavor.

Even amidst the tragedy, we can take pride in the performance of our military personnel in the critical moments before, during and after the attack. This is a classic case of training paying off. The guards on the top of the building spotted the truck, recognized

the danger and immediately radioed an alarm. Undoubtedly some lives were saved by the alertness and quick reactions of the guards. A patrol in a humvee responded to the alarm, and a security policeman arrived on the scene in time to warn away four or more joggers. He then went to investigate the truck and only survived the blast because it was deflected into the air by the barrier wall.

Training also paid off in how everyone behaved after the blast. Nineteen airmen were killed in the blast, but 200 more were injured seriously enough to visit the clinic for treatment. The Air Force has a buddy system, and the buddies took care of each other. Everyone arrived at the clinic accompanied by a buddy. All the troops have had some basic medical training, and the doctors reported to me that everyone who arrived at the clinic had had some emergency medical "buddy care." So on this score, I am also satisfied--our commanders have trained the troops well, and they knew how to react in a crisis.

The troops want the perpetrators to be found and severely punished. But more importantly, they want to prove they will not be deflected from their mission. By the time I arrived, four days after attack, they had already restored the full operating tempo. Operation Southern Watch hardly missed a beat. The no-fly zone below the 32nd parallel is still in force.

Why, in the face of serious concern about force protection and extensive measures to improve force protection, did the Khobar Towers tragedy occur? I have asked [retired Army] Gen. Wayne Downing to make an independent assessment of the circumstances surrounding the bombing. I expect to be able to give you a complete answer to this question when Gen. Downing's assessment is completed in August. But based on what I have already learned, I can give you a partial answer.

First of all, the security measures we introduced after the bombing of the Saudi National Guard facility were focused on a threat less powerful than actually occurred.

Secondly, and partially related to our understatement of the threat, our local commanders, for a variety of reasons, had not completed some of the measures that were prescribed and which they agreed needed to be done.

Why did we focus on a threat which proved to be understated?

For the decades of American presence there, it seemed that Saudi Arabia was safe from the terrorist violence occurring in other countries in the Middle East.

During the five years since Desert Storm, we have maintained an increased military presence, but the security provisions for the residences and offices of our personnel were roughly comparable to those for the forces based in Germany, Japan or even the United States. Yet even then we knew that the mission we are conducting in Saudi Arabia, so vital to us, is opposed by others.

Certainly it is opposed by Iraq and Iran, since our forces in the region deter them from actions they might otherwise take. And our very presence in Saudi Arabia is opposed by some religious extremists in that country, some of whom are willing to use violent measures to drive us out.

In November of last year, a group of Saudi religious extremists attacked the office of the US program manager for the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh with a car bomb, killing five Americans. That was a wake-up call. At that point, we made what we believed to be a prudent judgment that this attack might not be an isolated event, but a new trend and a high terrorist threat level to Saudi Arabia.

In response to this judgment, we conducted analyses of the vulnerability of our forces in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations conducted a vulnerability analysis of the Khobar Towers that was completed in January of this year. It was informed by full access to the intelligence information on the terrorist threat to Saudi Arabia.

But the intelligence information, while voluminous and pointing to a high threat level, was also fragmentary and inconclusive. It did not provide the user with any specific threat, but rather laid out a wide variety of threat alternatives.

Consequently, our commanders received recommendations to take a variety of actions. Many actions were completed prior to the June attack. Some focused on preventing an attack similar to the November bombing. Other actions focused on preventing attacks of a completely different nature and may have prevented a different type of attack from taking place.

My assessment is that our commanders were trying to do right, but given the inconclusive nature of the intelligence, had a difficult task to know what to plan for.

The critical limitation on anti-terrorist intelligence is warning on specific terrorist operations. You need a critical level of intelligence to prevent an attack. Short of that level of information, commanders have to plan for a wide range of cases.

This attack turned out to be 10 times as powerful as the previous attack. It is evident from what is already known about the attack that the bombers were well organized, had sophisticated training, did extensive practice and had access to military-quality explosives and detonating devices.

Of course, the investigation is still under way, but I believe that is reasonable to assume that these bombers had extensive support from an experienced and well financed international terrorist organization. Therefore, I believe that it is prudent to conclude that we are now facing a significantly higher and more sophisticated threat than was evidenced by the bombing of the Saudi National Guard facility in Riyadh.

Why were the recommended security measures not yet completed at the time of the attack?

Based on his view of the threat and the vulnerability analysis done by OSI [Air Force Office of Special Investigations], the base commander undertook an extensive set of security measures at Khobar Towers. Gen. Peay will describe them to you in his testimony.

Some of these measures were still in process, but most of them had been accomplished at the time the attack was made on Khobar Towers. Indeed, the security measures that were already in place undoubtedly saved dozens, if not hundreds of lives. However, it is also undoubtedly true that significantly fewer casualties would have occurred if all of the prescribed security measures had been implemented by the time of the attack.

Gen. Downing's investigation will shed more light on why some of the recommended measures had not yet been completed, but it seems clear that local commanders would have put a higher priority on timing if they had perceived a threat as sophisticated and powerful as actually occurred.

What can we do to respond to the threat?

Gen. Peay, in his testimony, will tell you what additional security measures we have under way to deal with this higher threat level. Additionally, Gen. Downing is charged not only with assessing the Khobar Towers attack, but with recommending to us actions that should be taken to reduce our vulnerability to this terrorist threat, not just in Saudi Arabia, but throughout the Central Command.

But even before I receive Gen. Downing's assessment, I can tell you that the changes required to deal with this level of threat will be complex, expensive and take many months to implement. It is fundamentally difficult to provide protection against such a threat, particularly in an urban environment. Therefore, I have instructed Gen. Peay to include in his recommendations a plan to move our military forces out of Riyadh and other urban environments, where it is difficult to provide adequate physical security.

But we should not limit our response to this outrageous attack to passive security measures. We should also go on the offensive. International terrorists do pose a more sophisticated threat to us, but they are also more vulnerable than local terrorists to intelligence penetration. Therefore we must intensify our intelligence targeting of international terrorists in the Mideast. The goal is to discover their identities, their sources of funds, their materiel flow and their plans in order to pre-empt them before they attack. ...

But whatever we do and however much we invest in anti-terrorist activities, we cannot eliminate the risk. No one works harder at anti-terrorism than the British and the Israelis, and they have not yet found an adequate protection for their citizens from car bombs detonated in an urban environment. And we must expect that the terrorists will not give up on the goal of driving us from Saudi Arabia and the region. We must not let them succeed. We must not cut and run in the face of these attacks.

The risks of our mission in the gulf are real, but the mission justifies the risks. To recognize the importance of our presence, we have only to think back to 1990 when we had no deployed forces on the ground in the region. We ended up having to deploy more than half a million troops to protect Saudi Arabia and expel Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait. We won the war, but at a great cost in dollars and lives.

It is far better to deter a war than to have to fight one. It is my judgment that this mission is worth the risks associated with it. Every day we have a variety of aircraft in the air over Iraq. Every day those operations include risks. And every day there will be risk of a terrorist attack. But we must take every action we can to minimize those risks.

Whose responsibility is it to minimize the risk to our troops? Force protection is the responsibility of everyone in the chain of command. That responsibility runs from the commander in chief of the Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida to his subordinate commanders in the field to unit commanders and on down to the lowest ranking noncommissioned officer.

But ultimately, the responsibility is mine as secretary of defense. I take this responsibility very seriously. The safety and welfare of our forces is my highest priority. But I assume that responsibility with the sober recognition that we can only reduce, and not eliminate, the risk. We are determined to reduce that risk, in Saudi Arabia and throughout the world, wherever American forces serve to protect America's security.

Am I confident that everything is in place to prevent such an incident from happening again? No, I am not, and I never will be. Nor do I want any of our commanders to be complacent.

What our military personnel do for a living is inherently dangerous. Every training exercise carries risks. Every deployment involves risks, even when the deployments are to regions far more benign than the Persian Gulf. And every time I sign a deployment order--for a real mission or just an exercise--the safety of our personnel is foremost in my mind.

This is the heaviest burden I carry. I know that my decision will put someone's life in danger. But it is a responsibility I cannot avoid by refusing to authorize the deployment. Safety concerns cannot paralyze us. When a tragedy happens, we mourn the deaths and share the grief of the families, but then we have to carry on, and we have to take the actions that will reduce risks in the future.

But no action we or the Saudis can take will provide absolute guarantees of the complete safety and security of each of our personnel in Saudi Arabia. The mission to which both our governments are committed involves the vital national security interests of both nations.

Enhancing physical barriers, increasing vigilance and improving intelligence will go far as precautions against such attacks, but we can never fashion absolute defenses against

the criminals and terrorists who seek to attack us. Just as our personnel are dedicated to the cause of freedom, others are dedicated to striking at its very core.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to sum up with four points.

First, the Khobar Towers bombing was a tragedy that revealed vulnerabilities in the force protection measures we had taken.

Second, we can expect further attacks on our facilities in the command. Therefore we are undertaking a major program to improve our force protection measures throughout the command. This will include plans to rebase our forces, now located in urban areas.

Third, we must capture and punish the bombers. If we identify another nation as the source of the bombing, we should retaliate.

Fourth, we must not let the bombers drive us out of the gulf region. The mission there is vital to our national security interest and must be continued.