

## US must regain moral ascendancy

By Thomas J. Raleigh

**NEW YORK** - The greatest setback in the war on terrorism isn't the failure to capture Osama bin Laden; nor is it the failure to quell the growing insurgency in Iraq. It has been the utter loss of moral ascendancy as a nation in the pursuit of those aims. The restoration of US moral ascendancy ought to be the top priority for newly appointed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice - otherwise the ultimate destruction of Al Qaeda and the establishment of a viable democracy in Iraq will be in jeopardy.

I first heard the term "moral ascendancy" in 1985 at Fort Benning, Ga. A speaker addressing officers at the Infantry School, Gen. Richard Cavazos, asserted that in battle, nothing is more important than to achieve moral ascendancy over the enemy. He did not define "moral ascendancy," nor did he explain how one achieves it. The concept remained profound and at the same time impenetrable to me for most of my Army career. I finally "got it" while serving as an Army attaché at the US Embassy in Moscow.

On Sept. 12, 2001, as I returned to Moscow from St. Petersburg, I was struck by the physical signs of solidarity and sympathy that Russians had placed on the sidewalk in front of our embassy: rows of candles, mounds of flowers. Older women - venerable *babushkas* - stood in small huddles murmuring prayers. The candles and flowers and prayers were an acknowledgment that we faced a common threat, and shared common shock, grief, and cause.

As a result of 9/11 attacks, the US was indisputably in a position of moral ascendancy - that is, the unambiguous and near-universal perception that your cause is right. It is more than sympathy. It's "actionable sympathy." Moral ascendancy is to the diplomat, military attaché, or CIA case-officer what "being ahead in the count" is to the baseball pitcher. You are in the driver's seat. It is a good position to be in when you need help.

Serving in the intelligence community post-9/11, I learned that when your country has moral ascendancy, the most powerful intelligence collection tool isn't necessarily a \$50 million satellite or a highly placed agent or source. It can be simply a business card.

One day in Moscow, armed only with a business card, I managed to talk my way past half a dozen gatekeepers and walk into the office of a senior Russian government official. This official was also a retired Soviet Army general who fought the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan. Few knew Afghanistan and its military geography as well as he. The general strode across the room and shook my hand. I asked for his help. He shook his fist, and said something unprintable about the terrorists who had murdered thousands a few days before. He then made one phone call. He told me to come back in the evening, and suggested that I bring my boss. I did. We had a nice chat. We found the observations of the general's associates interesting, as did the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs a couple of days hence.

When a nation enjoys moral ascendancy, the government-to-government cooperation critical to fighting a global threat is fast-tracked. What was once impossible or unimaginable becomes simple and straightforward:

- Intelligence cooperation? "Here's what we've got, and more is on the way."
- Overflight permission? "No problem."
- Refueling stops? "Absolutely."
- Support to military operations? "Yes, but - due to the sensitivity - on the QT."

These are the simple, often mundane things that are nevertheless essential to conducting a global war against terrorists. Lose moral ascendancy, and such intergovernmental cooperation becomes problematic:

- Intelligence cooperation? "We'll let you know if we hear something."
- Overflight permission? "Perhaps our ministers can discuss this in Brussels next month."
- Refueling stops? "My government is under considerable pressure to terminate our support of your ongoing military operation."
- Support to military operations? "We regret to inform you that we will withdraw our contingent from Iraq in the coming weeks."

Few would deny that the US continues to have moral ascendancy over Al Qaeda. However, by its very nature, the fight against terrorism requires that a nation possess moral ascendancy in a global sense. "Old Europe," Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, weapons of mass destruction - these issues have not only damaged US credibility, but have also eroded its moral ascendancy. Three years after 9/11, America has few friends and precious little sympathy in the world, even among traditional allies. This is an untenable position to be in when fighting a sophisticated, determined, well-financed, and ruthless enemy that has global reach.

Fighting terrorism is a team effort; one can't go it alone and win. Counterterrorism, counterproliferation, countertrafficking, travel documents security, and other such efforts are inherently cooperative. By mortgaging moral ascendancy in support of dubious policies that may yield some short-term gains, the US has severely fractured the basic foundation on which warfighting coalitions and international cooperation - key to antiterrorism - are based.

Those who are considering America's next steps in Iraq must recognize that its lack of moral ascendancy is an undeniable feature of the present strategic landscape, and something that will complicate planning and hinder efforts to detect and destroy terrorist networks. We are losing the war on terrorism not in the streets of Baghdad, but in the pubs in Ireland, in the cafes on the Continent, and at the dinner tables of moderate Arabs.

As much as the US needs a plan to take down Al Qaeda, as much as it needs to reassess its objectives and how to best achieve them in Iraq, the nation's leadership just as urgently needs a plan, a campaign, to regain moral ascendancy in the eyes of the world.

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