

HOMELAND SECURITY: UVA CRITICAL INCIDENT GROUP TALKS TERRORISM AT FORUM

"How and why terrorism manifests itself in Iraq and elsewhere was at the forefront of a discussion Sunday at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs.

The freewheeling talk among a group of 12 distinguished and diverse panelists - ranging from former foreign and U.S. government officials to academics - often came back to the war in Iraq.

Margaret Warner, a senior correspondent on PBS' "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," moderated the session.

Former Sen. Charles S. Robb introduced the talk, titled "Root, Stem and Branch: Home-Grown Radicals and the Limits of Terrorism," by drawing comparisons between the war in Iraq and Vietnam, where he served. Robb, also a former Virginia governor, served on the Iraq Study Group.

He said Vietnam's lessons still apply today: "That the U.S. cannot expect to win ... without the support of the American people," and that it will be difficult to win if U.S. troops kill civilians indiscriminately, among other lessons.

Panelists looked at some of the historical root causes of terrorism. The Critical Incident Analysis Group, based at UVA's medical school, brings together a wide-range of people who analyze "critical" events and seeks to counteract the effects through studying past events.

The group will continue talks today and Tuesday on "Home-Grown Terrorism and the Global War on Terror."

One question Sunday centered on why there had not been another attack similar to that of Sept. 11, 2001.

"They don't need to do another 9/11 at the moment," said Lord John Thomas Alderdice, an important political figure in Northern Ireland.

He and other speakers explained that terrorists had hit a massive U.S. nerve and believed that as a result, especially given the situation in Iraq, were winning the war.

"They're engaged [in battle in Iraq and elsewhere] and they believe that they are winning," Alderdice said.

Scott Atran, an anthropologist from Columbia University, said it's American policy that is fueling terrorism. The U.S.' foreign policy has been akin to "using a boxing glove to swat a fly."

Starting a war in Iraq, for example, has given the al-Qaida terrorist group more legitimacy, he said, for an organization that is in reality very weak.

Other questions posed to panelists got at the sociological roots and what drives people, particularly young Muslims, to terrorism.

"The potential is always there for a group of people to say 'this is Islam,'" said retired Col. Walter Patrick Lang Jr., a wartime veteran and Middle East expert who briefed President George H.W. Bush.

Asked after the meeting his position on the current feud between Congress and the White House on whether American troops should pull out of Iraq at a specific deadline, Lang said setting a deadline would result in a "collapse" of the violent situation.

"I think we've gotten ourselves to an absolute impasse here," Lang said. "There are no exits."

But while he said he doesn't believe Americans can stomach a long war in Iraq, pulling out at a certain time would "light a fuse" under the volatile situation.

David Sauber, a 59-year-old Charlottesville resident who attended the discussion, said he would have liked to have seen a discussion more about solutions, not just a description of the problem.

One comment particularly stuck out in Sauber's mind, he said: When Atran, the anthropologist, described the situation on the ground after massive earthquakes struck South Asia in 2005.

Atran said that despite the fact the U.S. poured in money, the biggest effect on people impacted by the earthquake was the Cuban government, which sent doctors.

One cannot quantify the benefit of foreign policy done "people to people," Sauber said." (*Jeremy Borden, The Daily Progress, April 1, 2007*)