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Former Aide Takes Aim at War on Terror

By Laura Blumenfeld

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Five days before the war began in Iraq, as President Bush prepared to raise the terrorism threat level to orange, a top White House counterterrorism adviser unlocked the steel door to his office, an intelligence vault secured by an electronic keypad, a combination lock and an alarm. He sat down and turned to his inbox.

"Things were dicey," said Rand Beers, recalling the stack of classified reports about plots to shoot, bomb, burn and poison Americans. He stared at the color-coded threats for five minutes. Then he called his wife: *I'm quitting.*

Beers's resignation surprised Washington, but what he did next was even more astounding. Eight weeks after leaving the Bush White House, he volunteered as national security adviser for Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.), a Democratic candidate for president, in a campaign to oust his former boss. All of which points to a question: What does this intelligence insider know?

"The administration wasn't matching its deeds to its words in the war on terrorism. They're making us less secure, not more secure," said Beers, who until now has remained largely silent about leaving his National Security Council job as special assistant to the president for combating terrorism. "As an insider, I saw the things that weren't being done. And the longer I sat and watched, the more concerned I became, until I got up and walked out."

No single issue has defined the Bush presidency more than fighting terrorism. And no issue has both animated and intimidated Democrats. Into this tricky intersection of terrorism, policy and politics steps Beers, a lifelong bureaucrat, unassuming and tight-lipped until now. He is an unlikely insurgent. He served on the NSC under Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and the current Bush. The oath of office hangs on the wall by his bed; he tears up when he watches "The West Wing." Yet Beers decided that he wanted out, and he is offering a rare glimpse in.

"Counterterrorism is like a team sport. The game is deadly. There has to be offense and defense," Beers said. "The Bush administration is primarily offense, and not into teamwork."

In a series of interviews, Beers, 60, critiqued Bush's war on terrorism. He is a man in transition, alternately reluctant about and empowered by his criticism of the government. After 35 years of issuing measured statements from inside intelligence circles, he speaks more like a public servant

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"Counterterrorism is like a team sport. . . . There has to be offense and defense," says Rand Beers. "The Bush administration is primarily offense." (Jahi Chikwendiu -- The Washington Post)

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than a public figure. Much of what he knows is classified and cannot be discussed. Nevertheless, Beers will say that the administration is "underestimating the enemy." It has failed to address the root causes of terror, he said. "The difficult, long-term issues both at home and abroad have been avoided, neglected or shortchanged and generally underfunded."

The focus on Iraq has robbed domestic security of manpower, brainpower and money, he said. The Iraq war created fissures in the United States' counterterrorism alliances, he said, and could breed a new generation of al Qaeda recruits. Many of his government colleagues, he said, thought Iraq was an "ill-conceived and poorly executed strategy."

"I continue to be puzzled by it," said Beers, who did not oppose the war but thought it should have been fought with a broader coalition. "Why was it such a policy priority?" The official rationale was the search for weapons of mass destruction, he said, "although the evidence was pretty qualified, if you listened carefully."

He thinks the war in Afghanistan was a job begun, then abandoned. Rather than destroying al Qaeda terrorists, the fighting only dispersed them. The flow of aid has been slow and the U.S. military presence is too small, he said. "Terrorists move around the country with ease. We don't even know what's going on. Osama bin Laden could be almost anywhere in Afghanistan," he said.

As for the Saudis, he said, the administration has not pushed them hard enough to address their own problem with terrorism. Even last September, he said, "attacks in Saudi Arabia sounded like they were going to happen imminently."

Within U.S. borders, homeland security is suffering from "policy constipation. Nothing gets done," Beers said. "Fixing an agency management problem doesn't make headlines or produce voter support. So if you're looking at things from a political perspective, it's easier to go to war."

The Immigration and Naturalization Service, he said, needs further reorganization. The Homeland Security Department is underfunded. There has been little, if any, follow-through on cybersecurity, port security, infrastructure protection and immigration management. Authorities don't know where the sleeper cells are, he said. Vulnerable segments of the economy, such as the chemical industry, "cry out for protection."

"We are asking our firemen, policemen, Customs and Coast Guard to do far more with far less than we ever ask of our military," he said. Abroad, the CIA has done a good job in targeting the al Qaeda leadership. But domestically, the antiterrorism effort is one of talk, not action: "a rhetorical policy. What else can you say -- 'We don't care about 3,000 people dying in New York City and Washington?'"

When asked about Beers, Sean McCormack, an NSC spokesman, said, "At the time he submitted his resignation, he said he had decided to leave government. We thanked him for his three decades of government service." McCormack declined to comment further.

However it was viewed inside the administration, onlookers saw it as a rare Washington event. "I can't think of a single example in the last 30 years of a person who has done something so extreme," said Paul C. Light, a scholar with the Brookings Institution. "He's not just declaring that he's a Democrat. He's declaring that he's a *Kerry* Democrat, and the way he wants to make a difference in the world is to get his former boss out of office."

Although Beers has worked in three Republican administrations, he is a registered Democrat. He wanted to leave the NSC quietly, so when he resigned, he said it was for "personal reasons." His friends called, worried: "Are you sick?"

When Beers joined the White House counterterrorism team last August, the unit had suffered several abrupt departures. People had warned him the job was impossible, but Beers was upbeat. On Reagan's NSC staff, he had replaced Oliver North as director for counterterrorism and counternarcotics, known as the "office of drugs and thugs."

"Randy's your model government worker," said Wendy Chamberlin, a U.S. Agency for International Development administrator for Iraq, who worked with Beers on counterterrorism on the NSC of the first Bush administration. "He works for the common good of the American people. He's fair, balanced, honest. No one ever gets hurt feelings hearing the truth from Randy."

The first thing Beers noticed when he walked into his new office was the pile of intelligence reports. The "threat stuff," as Beers calls it, was 10 times thicker than it had been before the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings.

He was in a job that would grind down anyone. Every day, 500 to 1,000 pieces of threat information crossed his desk. The typical mix included suspicious surveillance at a U.S. embassy; surveillance of a nuclear power plant or a bridge; a person caught by airport security with a

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weapon, or an airplane flying too close to the CIA; a tanker truck, which might contain a bomb, crossing the border and heading for a city; an intercepted phone call between suspected terrorists. Most of the top-secret reports -- pumped into his office from the White House Situation Room -- didn't pan out. Often they came from a disgruntled employee or a spouse.

When the chemical agent ricin surfaced in the London subway, "we were worried it might manifest here," he said. The challenge was: "Who do we alert? How do you tell them to organize?"

Every time the government raises an alarm, it costs time and money. "There's less filtering now because people don't want to make the mistake of not warning," he said. Before Sept. 11, 2001, the office met three times a week to discuss intelligence. Now, twice a day, at 7 a.m. and 3 p.m., it holds "threat matrix meetings," tracking the threats on CIA spreadsheets.

It was Beers's task to evaluate the warnings and to act on them. "It's a monstrous responsibility," said William Wechsler, director for transnational threats on Clinton's NSC staff. "You sit around every day, thinking about how people want to kill thousands of Americans."

Steven Simon, director for counterterrorism in the Clinton White House, said, "When we read a piece of intelligence, we'd apply the old how-straight-does-your-hair-stand-up-on-your-head test."

The government's first counterterrorism czar, Richard Clarke, who left his White House job in February after more than 10 years, said officials judged the human intelligence based on two factors: Would the source have access to the information? How reliable was his previous reporting? They scored access to information, *12345*; previous reporting, *abcd*. "A score of D5, you don't believe. A1 -- you do," Clarke said. "It's like a jolt of espresso, and you feel like -- *whoop* -- it pumps you up, and wakes you up."

It's easier to raise the threat level -- from code yellow to code orange, for example -- than to lower it, Beers said: "It's easier to see the increase in intelligence suggesting something's going to happen. What do you say when we're coming back down? Does nothing happening mean it's not going to happen? It's still out there."

After spending all day wrestling with global jihad, Beers would go home to his Adams Morgan townhouse. "You knew not to get the phone in the middle of the night, because it was for Dad," said his son Benjamin, 28. When the Situation Room called, Beers would switch to a black, secure phone that scrambled the signal, after fishing the key out of his sock drawer. There were times he would throw on sweats over his pajamas and drive downtown.

"The first day, I came in fresh and eager," he said. "On the last day, I came home tired and burned out. And it only took seven months."

Part of that stemmed from his frustration with the culture of the White House. He was loath to discuss it. His wife, Bonnie, a school administrator, was not: "It's a very closed, small, controlled group. This is an administration that determines what it thinks and then sets about to prove it. There's almost a religious kind of certainty. There's no curiosity about opposing points of view. It's very scary. There's kind of a ghost agenda."

In the end, Beers was arriving at work each day with knots in his stomach. He did not want to abandon his colleagues at such a critical, dangerous time. When he finally decided to quit, he drove to a friend's house in Arlington. Clarke, his old counterterrorism pal, took one look at the haggard man on his stoop and opened a bottle of Russian River Pinot Noir. Then he opened another bottle. Clarke toasted Beers, saying: You can still fight the fight.

Shortly after that, Beers joined the Kerry campaign. He had briefly considered a think tank or an academic job but realized that he "never felt so strongly about something in my life" than he did about changing current U.S. policies. Of the Democratic candidates, Kerry offered the greatest expertise in foreign affairs and security issues, he decided. Like Beers, Kerry had served in Vietnam. As a civil servant, Beers liked Kerry's emphasis on national service.

On a recent hot night, at 10 o'clock, Beers sat by an open bedroom window, wearing a T-shirt, his bare feet propped on a table.

Beers was on a three-hour conference call, the weekly Monday night foreign policy briefing for the campaign. The black, secure phone by his bedside was gone. Instead, there was a red, white and blue bumper sticker: "John Kerry -- President." The buzz of helicopters blew through the window. Since Sept. 11, 2001, it seemed, there were more helicopters circling the city.

"And we need to return to that kind of diplomatic effort . . .," Beers was saying, over the droning sound. His war goes on.