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TRACES OF TERROR: THE STRATEGY; Bush Aides Set Strategy to Sell Policy on Iraq

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

White House officials said today that the administration was following a meticulously planned strategy to persuade the public, the Congress and the allies of the need to confront the threat from Saddam Hussein.

The rollout of the strategy this week, they said, was planned long before President Bush's vacation in Texas last month. It was not hastily concocted, they insisted, after some prominent Republicans began to raise doubts about moving against Mr. Hussein and administration officials made contradictory statements about the need for weapons inspectors in Iraq.

The White House decided, they said, that even with the appearance of disarray it was still more advantageous to wait until after Labor Day to kick off their plan.

"From a marketing point of view," said Andrew H. Card Jr., the White House chief of staff who is coordinating the effort, "you don't introduce new products in August."

A centerpiece of the strategy, White House officials said, is to use Mr. Bush's speech on Sept. 11 to help move Americans toward support of action against Iraq, which could come early next year.

"Everybody felt that was a moment that Americans wanted to hear from him," said Karl Rove, Mr. Bush's chief political adviser. Sept. 11 will also be a time, Mr. Rove said, "to seize the moment to make clear what lies ahead."

Toward that end, in June the White House picked Ellis Island in New York Harbor, not Governors Island, as the place where President Bush is to deliver his Sept. 11 address to the nation. Both spots were considered, White House advisers said, but the television camera angles were more spectacular from Ellis Island, where the Statue of Liberty will be seen aglow behind Mr. Bush.

"We had made a decision that this would be a compelling story either place," said Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director. "We sent a team out to go and look and they said, 'This is a better shot,' and we said O.K."

In the same way, Mr. Bush's Sept. 11 remarks, about 10 minutes in length, are to serve as the emotional precursor for a tougher speech about Iraq that the president is to deliver to the United Nations General Assembly the following day.

"The fact is, there's a pretty abysmal relationship between Saddam Hussein and the United Nations," said Mr. Bartlett, who added that Mr. Hussein had flouted "everything the U.N. has stood for."

"The president is going to be very direct and articulate a history of defiance," Mr. Bartlett said.

Both speeches are in final drafts, although Mr. Bush spent time reviewing the United Nations speech on Thursday night on Air Force One as he returned to Washington from Indiana. "He's trimming it up so it's in his cadence," Mr. Rove said.

The Sept. 12 speech, a half hour or less in length, was written by a team that included Mr. Bush's chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson; Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser; Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld; and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. The Sept. 11 speech was written by Mr. Gerson and Karen P. Hughes, the former counselor who still closely advises Mr. Bush from Texas.

On Capitol Hill, meanwhile, the administration has begun a full-scale lobbying campaign. On the day after Labor Day, the opening of Washington's political new year, Mr. Bush summoned a skeptical Congressional leadership to the White House to enlist their support for action against Iraq. The next day two dozen senators from both parties were invited to the Pentagon to discuss Iraqi policy with Vice President Dick Cheney, Mr. Rumsfeld and George J. Tenet, the director of central intelligence.

Later in the day, Mr. Cheney and Mr. Tenet gave evidence on Iraqi military capacity to the top four Congressional leaders, some of whom have said the administration has provided no proof that the threat from Mr. Hussein is imminent.

"That was thought of as a necessary step, as was having the leadership down, as was the necessity of providing a higher level of intelligence," Mr. Rove said.

Another senior administration official said the White House lobbying campaign on Capitol Hill would include not-so-subtle mentions of the regrets experienced by those lawmakers, like former Senator Sam Nunn, who did not vote for the 1991 "use of force" resolution before the Persian Gulf war.

The White House wants a resolution approving the use of force in Iraq to be approved in the next four to five weeks.

"In the end it will be difficult for someone to vote against it," the administration official said.

White House officials said they began planning more intensively for the Iraq rollout in July. Advisers consulted the Congressional calendar to figure out the best time for Iraq hearings while Ms. Hughes, even as she was driving back to Texas, discussed with Mr. Bush the outlines of his Sept. 11 speech.

By August, with Congress out of town and the United Nations not convening until September, White House officials decided to wait out the month, even as final planning continued by phone between advisers in Washington and at Mr. Bush's ranch in Texas.

"There was a deliberate sense that this was not the time to engage in his process," Mr. Rove said. "The thought was in August the president is sort of on vacation."

White House officials refused to say today whether Mr. Bush would build on his United Nations speech and directly address the nation about his planned course in

Iraq. "Stay tuned," Mr. Bartlett said.

But some Republicans said that a speech to the nation was inevitable and necessary.

"At some time, they're going to have to talk directly to the people," said Michael K. Deaver, President Ronald Reagan's longtime communications strategist. "Because I think that people expect to hear from their commander in chief."

But Mr. Deaver, who helped create the stage for Mr. Reagan's 1980 presidential announcement speech in Battery Park, with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop, said the White House had done well in setting the agenda after a chaotic August.

"They have had a history of doing it their way, and doing it very well from a communications standpoint," Mr. Deaver said. "Once they get started, and once it is clearly part of a strategic plan, it moves well."

Photo: Andrew H. Card Jr. is coordinating the White House's strategy to persuade the public about Iraq. (Agence France-Presse)(pg. A6)