Rumsfeld Strikes Back at Critics of U.S. Effort on Terror

By DOUGLAS JEHL

HANNON, Ireland, Sept. 8 — With costs and casualties rising in the war on terrorism, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld struck back today at the administration’s widening circle of critics, saying they were complicating an already difficult task.

Mr. Rumsfeld did not mention any of the domestic critics by name. But he suggested that those who have been critical of the administration’s handling of the war in Iraq and its aftermath might be encouraging American foes to believe that the United States might one day walk away from the effort, as it has in past conflicts.

"We know for a fact that terrorists studied Somalia, and they studied instances that the United States was dealt a blow and tucked in, and persuaded themselves that they could in fact cause us to acquiesce in whatever it is they wanted to do," Mr. Rumsfeld said.

"The United States is not going to do that; President Bush is not going to do that," he said.

But, he went on: "To the extent that terrorists are given reason to believe he might, or, if he is not going to do, that the opponents might prevail in some way, and they take heart in that, and that leads to more money going into these activities, or that leads to more recruits, or that leads to more encouragement, or that leads to more staying power, obviously that does make our task more difficult."

Similar points were made by President Bush in his address to the nation on Sunday night in regard to Somalia and an attack on a Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983. Mr. Bush said that terrorists had asserted "that that if you inflict harm on Americans, we will run from a challenge," adding, "In this, they are mistaken."

Mr. Rumsfeld was responding to questions aboard his aircraft as he flew home to Washington at the end of a six-day trip to the Middle East, with stops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While he was away, Representative David Obey of Wisconsin, the top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, called for the resignation of Mr. Rumsfeld and that of the deputy defense secretary, Paul D. Wolfowitz, over what he called the dishonesty of the administration’s handling of the war in Iraq, particularly on the issue of what it would require from taxpayers and the military.

Throughout the trip, Mr. Rumsfeld sought to emphasize successes over setbacks, but he has sometimes bristled over criticism.

He has insisted that the administration’s decision to seek a new United Nations mandate for operations in Iraq did not represent any kind of policy shift. He has said that there is no need for the United States to send more troops to Iraq, suggesting that such a step would only make more Americans targets and would delay a handover of responsibilities to Iraqis.

He had not previously suggested that the administration’s critics might unwittingly be aiding the terrorist cause. He made that point in response to a question about criticism from Democratic presidential candidates and others, which Mr. Rumsfeld described as the "hits" that the administration was taking over issues related to costs and casualties, and whether the United States had enough troops in Iraq.

"There should be a debate and discussion on these things," he said. "We can live with that. We can live with a healthy debate as long as it is as elevated as possible, and as civil as possible."

But he said that his own experience, as a Middle East envoy in the Reagan administration after a bombing in Beirut killed 241 Americans, had persuaded him that the United States needed to have a higher tolerance for the costs of warfare.
He also cited as a mistake the American withdrawal from Somalia after the killing of 18 soldiers in a botched raid in 1993.

"It is hard to function in the world without there being losses," he said. "Any time an act of terrorism is rewarded, a lesson is learned by the terrorists. There are going to be losses if you do nothing, as we learned on Sept. 11, and there are going to be losses if you do something."

For particular criticism, Mr. Rumsfeld singled out Al Jazeera, the Arabic-language satellite television network based in Qatar, whose reports on the American-led occupation in Iraq have often been strongly critical.

"If you’ve got Al Jazeera, day after day after day, pounding the region with things that aren’t true, that makes it difficult," Mr. Rumsfeld said.

One of the most sensitive issues still outstanding for the administration is the American failure to date to produce evidence that Iraq was producing illicit weapons, something that Mr. Bush, Mr. Rumsfeld and other top officials cited as one of the main reasons for going to war.

Mr. Rumsfeld met during his trip with David Kay, an American who is heading the Iraqi Survey Group, the team now charged with coordinating the search for evidence of that Iraqi weapons program. Mr. Kay has said little in public in the many weeks since he took on the task this summer, but is expected to produce his first report on the issue sometime later this month.

The military has played a leading role in the search, and the Defense Intelligence Agency has also been centrally involved. But Mr. Rumsfeld sought today to distance himself from that process. He said that he had not asked for and that Mr. Kay had not provided him with any update on what new evidence, if any, the United States might now have uncovered.

"I have so many things to do in the Department of Defense," Mr. Rumsfeld said, "and Kay reports to George Tenet," referring to the director of central intelligence.