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IRAQ

Congress Shares Blame for War Mistakes

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Knight Ridder

August 21, 2005

Years from now when the historians begin analyzing the deadly mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan they will find that the one institution charged with standing guard between the civilian suits and the American troops in uniform that they command and send into harm's way utterly abdicated that vital responsibility.

The mistakes of omission and commission that abound in the record of two military operations -- one necessary, the other not -- were made by a president, a vice president and a secretary of defense and his civilian aides. But they would never have been allowed to stand uncorrected and swept under a convenient rock without the complicity of Congress, controlled by the same party that controlled the White House.

So when the time comes to point a finger don't forget those who people the marble halls of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives whose first duty seemed to be to protect the Republican Party and their president.

When they should have roared with anger, they instead whimpered and whined and rolled over like puppies to have their bellies scratched.

When evidence came that general officers lied to them about their complicity, and that of their civilian overseers, in the torture and degradation of the mixed bag of foreign fighters, terrorists and dumb kids in places like Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, they did their best to let it slide.

When the Pentagon ordered American divisions to leave their best and safest armored vehicles behind, parked in rows on their American bases, and go to war in thin-skinned Humvees in the deadliest place in the world, Congress said nothing.

When soldiers and Marines -- many of them Guardsmen and Reservists -- were sent off to war in old and useless flak jackets instead of the best body armor money could buy, members of Congress wrung their hands and urged Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld to do better.

When nearly 2,000 of those troops came home in military coffins to grieving families, and the secretary of defense used a machine to sign his name to letters of condolence to grieving families, the members of those august bodies the House and Senate issued press releases mourning the mounting losses.

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower -- a former general and a Republican president -- warned the nation in his farewell address in 1961 about a military-industrial complex that was gaining "unwarranted influence," he expected Congress to keep a sharp eye on those who feed at the public trough.

With this administration's style of management, and its foreign wars, the opportunity to begin dipping deeply into the Treasury was too tempting for some contractors and defense industry folks. Congress not only sat quiet for the most part but even urged them to feed more deeply in the trough.

There are exceptions. There are indeed principled and caring individual senators and representatives. But they are far and few between. Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., for one. Hagel is a Vietnam veteran, and he knows war and infantry combat firsthand. He has done his best to keep his party's leaders' feet in the fire on soldier issues and veterans issues and good citizen issues.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., is another Vietnam veteran who has done principled work in stopping the Boeing Co. from getting clean away with a \$30 billion gift horse from Congress in an aerial tanker lease deal with the Air Force. Two people from Boeing went to prison; some others from the Air Force and Congress should be their cellmates.

Sen. John Warner, R-Va., the patrician chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has tried to straddle the fence. He too is a veteran, wore a Navy uniform and understands soldier issues. He began as an administration cheerleader but has slowly come to see the evil that is being done and to speak up about that.

Sen. Lindsay Graham, R-S.C., who serves in the active Reserves, speaks out against the way the administration is conducting the war and joined McCain and Warner in slipping a small law into the Defense Appropriations Act that would ban the torture or deliberate degradation of any detainee in U.S. hands.

The Democrats are happy to criticize, but like their last presidential nominee, Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., who offered no better alternative to staying the course in Iraq, they are hamstrung by the lack of an alternative. Absent that, they are dead in the water.

War profiteering

Should a larger number of members of both parties suddenly find some courage and a few convictions, might we suggest that they start getting tough with the White House and the Pentagon, or else start polishing their resumé's?

We might even suggest the creation of a Wartime Profiteering Commission like the one established during World War II. Chairmanship was handed to a little-known senator from Missouri named Harry S. Truman. He turned out to be a fireball when it came to getting the snouts out of the public trough. If you stole from the government, and cheated America's soldiers of the best equipment, arms and ammunition they deserved, Harry Truman put you out of business or in prison, or both. A Truman Commission is needed right now.

A Congress with a great deal more backbone is even more desperately needed.

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