

Senators demand answers

WASHINGTON - **When the white-maned lion of the Senate engaged the steely-eyed defense chief in verbal combat over the war in Iraq this past week, Americans saw the terms of our dilemma in sharp relief.**

Usually, hearings on Capitol Hill are decorous and, not infrequently, boring. Not this one before the Senate Armed Services Committee. Everyone in the room tensed as Sen. Ted Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, glared at Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "Mr. Secretary," he said, "this war has been seriously and grossly mismanaged." He called it a "quagmire." He said, "Our troops are dying, and there is no end in sight."

He then listed mistakes he said Rumsfeld had made - insisting Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, sending in too few troops, sending soldiers to urban warfare without proper armor and equipment, expecting occupying soldiers to be greeted with flowers as liberators, having no plan to stop the looting and disbanding Iraq's army and police forces instead of using them.

"Isn't it time for you to resign?" Kennedy asked.

The furious defense secretary willed himself not to explode. He had offered his resignation to President Bush, who refused to accept it, Rumsfeld said levelly.

Then he ticked off reasons why he said the United States was right to go to war - Saddam Hussein is out of power and the Iraqi people are liberated, Iraq is being rebuilt (1,300 of 3,500 construction projects are finished) and a timetable for withdrawal would hearten the terrorists. Calling Iraq a quagmire couldn't be further from the truth, he said. This is not Vietnam.

When Sen. John McCain, the Arizona Republican and a former prisoner of war in Vietnam, got the microphone, he praised the troops serving in Iraq, but said he is "very worried" that the United States is "overstressing our Guard and reservists," some of whom are going back to Iraq for a second and third time. He said he worries about recruiting shortfalls and retention. He said there are ongoing firefights over areas in Iraq that were already fought for and cleared as foreign insurgents pour across the borders into Iraq.

McCain, who thinks withdrawal would be disastrous for Iraq and the United States, also said he is frustrated with the Bush administration's reluctance to tell the American people basic details about Iraq, such as what percentage of the 170,000 Iraqis trained to fight are actually combat-ready.

Rumsfeld said that was classified.

It went on like that for hours, with Republicans and Democrats alike pelting Rumsfeld and the three top generals with complaints. Gen. John Abizaid, the commander of Central Command, contradicted Vice President Cheney's contention that the Iraq insurgency is in its last throes. Abizaid said that the level of insurgents is not in decline. There's a lot of work in Iraq left to do, he said.

At one point, Sen. Robert Byrd, Democrat of West Virginia, said he couldn't take it any more. He said Americans have a right to know what's happening in Iraq because they're paying for the war with the lives of their young men and women and billions of tax dollars.

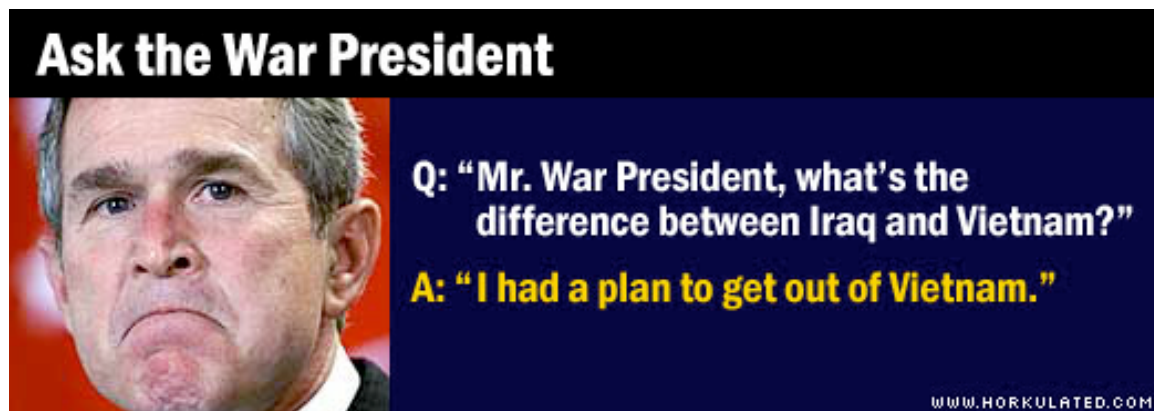
Looking at Rumsfeld, Byrd accused him of sneering. "I don't mean to be discourteous, but I've heard enough of your smart answers. Get off your high horse when you come up here. I have to run for reelection and you don't. We represent the American people and they are asking questions. They haven't been told the truth. The administration says we're unpatriotic if we ask questions, but that's our job."

Byrd wants to know how much the war will cost, where the money will come from, how long Americans will die in Iraq and what will happen if the Iraqis miss their Aug. 15 deadline for crafting a constitution and ending political bickering.

Bush is about to give a series of speeches about the war. They had better be persuasive. They had better have some hard and new facts. They had better be built on the premise that the only way the United States can lose this war is if the American people demand withdrawal, which is no longer inconceivable. Six out of ten Americans say the dream of democratizing Iraq has become a nightmare.

Rumsfeld has nothing to sneer about.

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Ask the War President

Q: "Mr. War President, what's the difference between Iraq and Vietnam?"

A: "I had a plan to get out of Vietnam."

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