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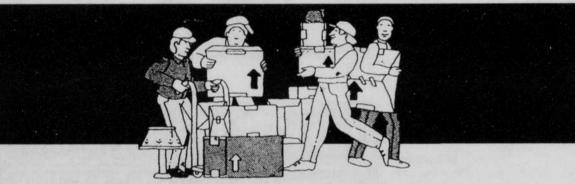
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Iraq intelligence committee nixed

The Senate turns down a bill that would have created a commission designed to investigate intelligence cited during the State of the Union

> By James Kuhnhenn Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON - With Republicans closing ranks around President Bush, the Senate on Wednesday voted down a Democratic proposal to create an independent bipartisan commission to investigate the administration's use of secret intelligence to justify war with Iraq.

The vote came as George Tenet, the director of the CIA, completed nearly four hours of closed-door questioning by Republican and Democratic senators and as the White House fought back against charges that it manipulated spy data to wage war against Saddam Hussein.

The Senate killed the independent-commission proposal 51-45 in a party-line vote. Republicans accused Democrats of playing politics and argued that the House of Representatives and Senate intelligence committees already are conducting their own inquiries, albeit behind closed doors so far.

Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, reiterated his vow to hold public hearings on Iraq intelligence matters in September.

In the past few days, Democrats have grown increasingly aggressive in their criticism of Bush's management of the war and occupation of Iraq. They've been motivated by the military's failure to find weapons of mass destruction in the country and by the White House admission last week that the president's State of the Union speech in January shouldn't have asserted that Iraq tried to obtain uranium in Africa to revive its nuclearweapons program.

U.S. intelligence agencies had warned for months before the speech that they couldn't verify that allegation, although Tenet acknowledged last Friday that he approved Bush's inclusion of it in the speech, in which the president credited his source as British intelligence. Democrats suggest that the inclusion of the unsubstantiated allegation betrays the Bush administration's zeal to go to war whether the facts justified it or not.

The proposed independent commission, sponsored by Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., would have examined whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, whether it had links to al-Qaida and whether it possessed systems to deliver chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

"We need to understand whether this is part of a broader pattern, a selective release of information or just a series of unfortunate snafus," Corzine said of the uranium claim.

"I'm tired of making a mountain out of a molehill," countered Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska. "This is not Watergate. It's not even truthgate. . . . This is an attempt to smear the president of the United States."

While most Republicans accused Democrats of exploiting events in Iraq for political gain, some said the administration's use of intelligence was worth a detailed examination by the intelligence committees.

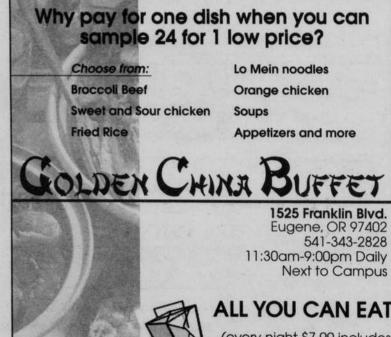
"It is important to understand what transpired," said Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, a member of the Senate intelligence panel. "Future presidents, when they're making a decision based on intelligence, (the current controversy) could raise questions about the veracity of that intelligence. We never can allow that to happen. It goes to the height of our national security. However it came about, we need to know about it.

Tenet's appearance before the Senate Intelligence Committee was his first on Capitol Hill since he took responsibility last week for the inclusion of the uranium reference in Bush's speech.

"The director was very contrite, he was very candid, he was very forthcoming," Roberts said afterward.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, the Democratic vice chairman of the committee, described the questioning as "very rigorous."

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