

January 12, 2007

Devastating Criticism on Iraq by Both Parties

By [ANNE E. KORNBLUT](#)

WASHINGTON, Jan. 11 — From the very first remarks, the tone was set: courteous, serious — and devastating.

When Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday, the [Democrats](#), newly ascendant in Congress and frustrated by the war in [Iraq](#), controlled the microphone.

Senator [Christopher J. Dodd](#) of Connecticut accused the administration of letting American soldiers be used as “cannon fodder.” Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), the chairman, called the president’s new strategy “a tragic mistake” and said the plan “is more likely to make things worse.” Senator Bill Nelson, of Florida, and a former supporter of administration policy, said he could no longer back the president.

“I have not been told the truth,” Mr. Nelson said. “I have not been told the truth over and over again by administration witnesses, and the American people have not been told the truth.”

Perhaps surprisingly, the language changed little when it was the [Republicans’](#) turn. “You’ve clearly heard the skepticism that has been expressed this morning by so many of my colleagues, and for good reason,” said Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. Senator George V. Voinovich of Ohio, noting that he previously went along with the president and “bought into his dream,” demanded the administration “do a much better job” of explaining its strategy. A smattering of applause erupted when Senator [Chuck Hagel](#) of Nebraska warned that Mr. Bush’s new plan would be “the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam, if it’s carried out.”

On a committee renowned for its bipartisanship and restraint, the questioning on Thursday, the day after a major presidential address on Iraq, amounted to a powerful blast. Though the mood was somber and the tone remained polite, members of the committee pressed Ms. Rice with extraordinary sharpness. And on a panel with at least five lawmakers considering running for president, members kept reminding the secretary — and one another — that the stakes were extraordinarily high.

“The fundamental question that the American people — and, I think, every senator on this panel, Republican and Democrat — are having to face now is, at what point do we say, ‘Enough?’” said [Senator Barack Obama](#) of Illinois, a likely Democratic presidential contender.

Administration officials fanned out across Capitol Hill to answer that question, over and over, on Thursday, facing a hostile Congress and varying degrees of partisanship.

Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#), who inherited the war in Iraq just three weeks ago, appeared before members of the House Armed Services Committee to discuss the increase in troop levels. Members thanked him for his candor, seemingly grateful to have a new witness before them, rather than former Defense Secretary [Donald H.](#)

[Rumsfeld](#), who was often combative.

The soft-spoken Mr. Gates, making his first appearance as defense secretary before the committee that oversees the military, admitted that “mistakes have certainly been made by the United States in Iraq, just like in virtually every war in human history.”

“That is the nature of war,” Mr. Gates said. “But however we got to this moment, the stakes now are incalculable.”

The party lines were clearer in the House hearing before the Armed Services committee, where Representative [Duncan Hunter](#) of California, the most senior Republican and other Republicans offered their support for the administration and Democrats pressed for an exact calendar in Iraq. “At what point do we say, ‘Enough is enough?’” said [Representative Martin T. Meehan](#), Democrat of Massachusetts.

But it was left to Ms. Rice, an important fixture — and survivor — in an administration now in its seventh year, to defend against the tough condemnations in the Senate, where a vote on a resolution about the war could take place as early as next week.

Seated alone at a large table in front of the committee in a chilly Senate hearing room, where the front rows were filled with protesters, Ms. Rice appeared frustrated at times, as committee members variously interrupted her, challenged her or all but accused her of representing a dishonest administration.

Lawmakers argued with Ms. Rice over what to call the latest plan — she corrected critics who referred to it as an “escalation,” describing it as an “augmentation” — and over whether a civil war is underway.

When Ms. Rice asserted that insurgents, not warring Shiite and Sunni factions, were mainly responsible for American casualties, Mr. Hagel shot back, “Madame Secretary, your intelligence and mine is a lot different.”

He added, “To sit there and say that, Madame Secretary, that’s just not true.”

“Well, Senator, if you’ll —,” Ms. Rice began.

“That is not true,” Mr. Hagel repeated.

“Senator, if you’ll allow me to finish,” Ms. Rice said, visibly exasperated, finally conceding that Iraqi attacks on other Iraqis are taking place in the form of death squads.

Even with at least five members of the committee preparing to run against one another for president, their themes were unified. Mr. Biden, who has said he will run, deftly called on his potential rivals, including Mr. Dodd, who had announced his candidacy hours earlier on the [Don Imus](#) radio show, and Senator [John Kerry](#) of Massachusetts, the former Democratic presidential nominee.

Mr. Biden and Mr. Hagel, another possible contender, exchanged whispers at various points; Mr. Obama stopped to chat with Mr. Biden before leaving the hearing early.

Perhaps the most aggressive questioner of Ms. Rice was the Democrat who has announced he will not run: Senator [Russell D. Feingold](#) of Wisconsin, who has consistently opposed the war and demanded Thursday that Congress “use the power of the purse” to cut off financing and take American troops out of Iraq.

In an especially contentious exchange, Mr. Feingold asked Ms. Rice: “Is the United States more secure now as a result of our military incursion into Iraq than we were before we entered Iraq?” Dissatisfied with her responses, Mr. Feingold repeated the same line three more times.

The only moment of levity came as a protester was dragged from the room; Mr. Hagel joked that the man must have been from Delaware, Mr. Biden’s home state.

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