

Feinstein: Bad Choice for Intelligence

Foreign Policy in Focus December 23, 2008, by Stephen Zunes

Ignoring the pleas of those calling for a more credible figure, Senate Democrats have instead chosen Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) to lead the Senate Committee on Intelligence. Feinstein was among those who falsely claimed in 2002 — despite the lack of any apparent credible evidence — that Saddam Hussein had somehow reconstituted Iraq’s arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, as well as its nuclear weapons program.

She used this supposed threat to justify her vote in October 2002 to grant President George W. Bush the unprecedented authority to invade Iraq. Most congressional Democrats voted against the resolution. So it is particularly disturbing that Democrats would award the coveted Intelligence Committee chair to someone from the party’s right-wing minority.

She took this extreme hawkish position out of her own predilection, not because of political pressure. Indeed, Senator Feinstein acknowledged at the time of her vote that calls and emails to her office were overwhelmingly opposed to her supporting Bush’s war plans. She decided to ignore her constituents and vote in favor of the resolution anyway.

Background to the Vote

Public opinion polls in the fall of 2002 showed a majority of Americans would support a U.S. invasion of Iraq only if it posed a serious threat to the national security of the United States. Unfortunately for Senator Feinstein and others eager for the United States to conquer that oil-rich country, Iraq wasn’t a threat to the United States. Though Iraq once had an arsenal of chemical weapons as well as an active chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons development program, these were all destroyed or otherwise eliminated by the mid-1990s, as were their missiles and other delivery systems. With strict sanctions prohibiting imports of requisite technologies and raw materials, and a lack of adequate internal capacity to produce them in Iraq, it was physically impossible for the Iraqis to have reconstituted its “weapons of mass destruction” (WMDs).

Former chief UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter had briefed Senator Feinstein before the 2002 vote, and presented evidence that Iraq had achieved at least qualitative disarmament and could in no way be a threat to U.S. national security. According to Ritter, “I had her look me in the eye and I asked her if she had seen any credible evidence contradicting my conclusions. She said she had not.”

Similarly, I was among a number of scholars, arms control analysts, and other constituents who briefed her staff on how — given the ongoing strict international sanctions imposed on that country and rigorous UN inspections through the end of 1998 — there was no way for Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to have reconstituted his biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs. Citing reports from the UN, reputable think tanks, and recognized arms control experts — as well as articles from respected peer-reviewed academic journals — we thought we had made a convincing case that Iraq was no longer a threat to the United States or its neighbors.

Despite all this, Senator Feinstein insisted that Iraq somehow remained a “consequential threat” to the national security of the United States and claimed that Iraq still possessed biological and chemical weapons. And, in an effort to defend Bush’s call for a U.S. invasion, she tried to discredit the UN inspections regime that had successfully disarmed Iraq by falsely claiming that “arms inspections, alone, will not force disarmament.”

Similarly, even though the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency had correctly noted in 1998 that Iraq's nuclear program had been completely eliminated, Feinstein also falsely claimed that Saddam Hussein "is engaged in developing nuclear weapons."

When asked about such exaggerated claims regarding Iraq's military prowess, she insisted that she was somehow "privy to information that those in California are not." However, despite repeated requests to her office to make public what she was supposedly privy to, the only information her office provided has been the White House's summary of a 2003 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). Based on the testimony of a handful of disreputable Iraqi exiles, this NIE met with widespread derision at the time of its release for its clearly inaccurate and politicized content.

Feinstein's supporters insist that her false claims about Iraqi WMDs were an honest mistake. But Ritter and other critics argue that it wasn't just ignorance and stupidity that led Feinstein to make these false statements about Iraq's military capabilities. She may very well have lied about the WMDs in order to frighten the public into supporting a U.S. takeover of that oil-rich country. Whether out of deceit or unawareness, however, Feinstein is clearly not suited to chair the committee.

Consequences of the Vote

I was also among a number of scholars specializing in the Middle East who warned Senator Feinstein that a U.S. invasion of Iraq would likely spark a disastrous armed insurgency, sectarian violence, and an increase in anti-American extremism in the Middle East and beyond. Despite this awareness of the likely consequences, however, she insisted that the United States should invade Iraq anyway. Such a decision raises serious questions as to whether she has the ability to rationally assess the costs and benefits of national security policies, which someone chairing the Intelligence Committee presumably should possess.

If her real goal was to protect our country from Iraq's alleged "weapons of mass destruction," however, she would have presumably called for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops once they invaded and occupied Iraq and discovered that there really weren't such weapons after all. It should have also been obvious that the longer U.S. troops stayed in that country, with its long tradition of resistance to foreign invaders, the more likely it would provoke a major armed insurgency and the rise of extremists groups. Despite this, Feinstein called on American troops to remain in Iraq for more than four years after the invasion. She voted to send hundreds of billions of dollars worth of taxpayers' money to support Bush's war effort even as California sank deeper and deeper into fiscal crisis.

During this occupation, U.S. authorities helped to rewrite the country's economic laws to allow American corporations to take over Iraqi industries and repatriate 100% of profits. Under U.S. tutelage, the new Iraqi government slashed corporate taxes and provided generous oil concessions to American conglomerates. In this way, the war has been extremely profitable for some giant corporations. Among these were the firms URS and Perini, both of which Feinstein's husband served as the majority owner. The Military Construction Appropriations subcommittee, under her leadership, steered government contracts to these very companies.

The Democratic Party's decision to appoint as head of the Senate Intelligence Committee someone with such a history of dubious judgment on intelligence matters is hardly new. The party chose Jay Rockefeller (WV) — who is leaving his post to chair the Commerce Committee — to chair the Intelligence Committee in January 2007, although he also made false claims about Iraq's WMD programs similar to those of Feinstein in order to justify his vote in favor of the invasion.

In the world of Senate Democrats, therefore, it appears that the quickest path to leadership in Intelligence comes from getting things wrong. http://www.fpif.org/articles/feinstein_bad_choice_for_intelligence