

Senate Democrats Show Some Spine

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Remarkable as it may sound, there is reason to believe that Congressional Democrats may finally be waking from their long slumber and stirring into a functional opposition party.

The United States Senate went back into session Tuesday for the first time since Vice President Dick Cheney's Chief of Staff, I. Lewis Libby, was indicted for lying to FBI agents and a federal grand jury looking into whether the White House deliberately set out to destroy the reputation of former Ambassador Joe Wilson after he revealed that the Administration's case for war in Iraq relied on a deliberate misreading of intelligence information. But it was not business as usual. Instead, Democrats used a rare procedural move to force the Republican-controlled Senate into a closed session to discuss the status of a promised investigation into the Administration's use and misuse of intelligence prior to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

With a grave tone that seemed dramatically out of character for dormant Democrats in recent years, Senate minority leader Harry Reid took to the floor of the chamber and declared, "I demand on behalf of the American people that we understand why these investigations aren't being conducted."

Senate majority leader Bill Frist, who has never left any doubt that his loyalty is to the Republican Party and his President rather than to the Republic, immediately accused Reid of attempting to "hijack" the Senate by forcing a discussion about accountability in matters of war and peace. Though he did not appear to recognize the irony in his statement, Frist said of the Democrats, "They have no convictions, they have no principles, they have no ideas."

But Reid pressed his point, calling for a closed session to discuss intelligence matters. Under Senate rules, which traditionally respect demands for closed-door sessions on intelligence, Reid's request was granted without a vote.

The galleries of the chamber were cleared of all spectators, and the doors to the Senate were shuttered.

Predictably, Mississippi Senator Trent Lott, the former majority leader who is always looking for a camera shot, rushed out to accuse Reid of making "some sort of stink about Scooter Libby and the CIA leak" and derided the Democratic leader for seeking a closed-door session to discuss a matter as inconsequential—in Lott's view—as whether the American people and the Congress were lied to prior to the launch of a war that has left more than 2,000 US troops and tens of thousands of Iraqis dead.

But Reid's mission was far more specific than to raise "some sort of stink about Scooter Libby."

The Senate minority leader and his chief aide, Illinois Democrat Dick Durbin, were taking up what has been a long struggle, conducted mostly by antiwar groups such as Progressive Democrats of America: to force Senate Intelligence Committee chair Pat Roberts, of Kansas, to keep his promise to conduct a thorough investigation of whether the Administration distorted intelligence in order to "sell" the war in Iraq.

Frist, Roberts and others huddled Tuesday to figure out a strategy to thwart the demand for the promised inquiry. But Reid's actions have finally focused attention on Roberts's past pledges. And there was serious speculation that the Democrat might force the Intelligence Committee chair to stop stonewalling.

Reid—like his predecessor, Tom Daschle—has rarely been as bold as the times have demanded. And the nation has suffered as a result.

But Tuesday he had mounted a challenge that is appropriate and necessary. As such, he merits the high praise of being referred to not as a Democrat or a Republican but as the leader of the opposition that this country has so sorely needed.

We can only hope that Reid will, by his actions in coming days, seek to retain the title.