

July 30, 2003

Blanket of Dread

By MAUREEN DOWD

WASHINGTON

There is no more delightful way to pass a summer's day in Washington than going up to Capitol Hill to watch senators jump ugly on Wolfie.

Many Democrats and Republicans on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee felt they had been snookered by Paul Wolfowitz, and they did not want to be played again.

They waited gimlet-eyed yesterday while Wolfowitz of Arabia shimmied away once more from giving the cost, in lives or troops or dollars, of remaking a roiling Iraq.

Instead, he offered a highly dramatic travelogue of his recent Iraq trip, sleeping in Saddam's palace and flying with members of the Tennessee National Guard, who made him "very unhappy" when they told him about their nearly two years of active duty. (Gee, whose fault is that?) He described Saddam's "torture tree," "unspeakable torture," "torture chamber" and "a smothering blanket of apprehension and dread woven by 35 years of repression."

"The military and rehabilitation efforts now under way in Iraq are an essential part of the war on terror," Mr. Wolfowitz proclaimed, capitalizing the "W" and the "T" in his written testimony, and underlining the sentence for those too dim to understand its essential importance.

Brazening out the failure to find the Saddam-Qaeda links and W.M.D. the administration aggrandized before the war, Mr. Wolfowitz has simply done an Orwellian fan dance, covering up the lack of concrete ties to the 9/11 terrorists with feathery assertions that securing "the peace in Iraq is now the central battle in the war on terror."

It is a new line of defense that was also used by Dick Cheney in a speech last week ("In Iraq, we took another essential step in the war on terror") and by the president in a speech on Monday ("And our current mission in Iraq is essential to the broader war on terror; it's essential to the security of the American people").

Even now that it's clear the Bushies played up the terror angle because they thought it was the best way to whip up support for getting rid of Saddam, the administration refuses to level with the public.

It dishes out the same old sauerkraut — conjuring up images of Al Qaeda by calling Iraqi guerrillas and foreign fighters "terrorists." Meanwhile, the real Qaeda may be planning more suicide hijackings of passenger planes on the East Coast this summer, Homeland Security says.

Noting that the administration is tamping down Iraq while Al Qaeda is bubbling up elsewhere, Senator

Russ Feingold pressed: "I would ask you, Secretary Wolfowitz, are you sure we have our eye on the ball?"

Senator Lincoln Chafee, Republican of Rhode Island, responded to Mr. Wolfowitz's oration about Saddam's tyranny by noting sharply that Liberia's Charles Taylor is also a vicious tyrant famous for dismembering and burning victims, and spreading war. "But we're doing nothing in Liberia," he said. He objected to Mr. Wolfowitz's using 9/11 to push regime change in Iraq, even though the hawk had advocated getting rid of Saddam all through the late 90's.

Senator Joseph Biden excoriated Mr. Wolfowitz for his lack of candor and said his own review of the Iraqi police force — "almost looked like the Katzenjammer Kids" — had convinced him democracy was way off.

"I no more agree, just for the record, with your assessment that Iraq is the hotbed of terror now than I did [with] your assertions about Al Qaeda connections at the front end," Mr. Biden said, adding that if officials did not tell the truth to the public about the costs in Iraq, they would lose credibility.

Spill all the facts? This crowd? Fat chance. Only yesterday, the administration showed ingenious new talent for insidious secrecy. President Bush refused to declassify the 28-page redaction about the Saudi government's role in financing the hijackings, even though the Saudi foreign minister flew to the U.S. to ask the president to do that. (You know you're in trouble when the Saudis are begging you to be more open.)

And Mr. Secrecy, John Poindexter, had another boneheaded scheme canceled at the Pentagon, when stunned senators learned that his department had started an online trading market, a dead pool, where investors could wager on terror attacks.

Even Mr. Wolfowitz, who has shown an audacious imagination in refashioning the Middle East, thought the death wagers were over the top: "It sounds like maybe they got too imaginative in this area."