

Opinion

As chairman, Sen. Coleman should have investigated Iraq contracts

By Mark Dayton

Article Last Updated: 10/09/2008 10:01:36 AM CDT

During World War II, Sen. Harry S. Truman chaired a powerful new committee of the United States Senate. Its mission was to expose waste and fraud in the federal government's war contracts and to investigate the resulting defects and deficiencies. Those abuses were costing American soldiers their lives and American taxpayers their money.

Today, that Senate committee is called the "Permanent Subcommittee for Special Investigations." Its chairman is in a very powerful position, because he decides what to investigate and has the authority to subpoena documents and witnesses.

When Norm Coleman entered the Senate in January 2003, he was immediately named the subcommittee's chairman by the Republican leadership. It was an unusually important post for a freshman senator. (By contrast, his predecessor, Democrat Carl Levin, had been a senator for 22 years before gaining that chairmanship.)

Shortly thereafter, the Iraq war began. When Iraq continued to disintegrate after Saddam Hussein's overthrow, it became apparent the American military would be required to remain there longer than initially expected. The manufacture of military supplies and their distribution had to be rapidly accelerated.

Soon there were reports of contract fraud, profiteering and substandard products that were again costing American taxpayers millions of dollars and jeopardizing the lives of our troops. Similar reports had spurred Truman to action 60 years before. Truman showed the courage and

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the patriotism to lead his investigations wherever the facts warranted, regardless of the political connections of the abusers.

Even though Truman was investigating shortcomings and mistakes in a Democratic administration, President Franklin Roosevelt rewarded his integrity and tenacity with the vice presidency.

Presented with a similar opportunity, Norm Coleman chose instead to "cut and run." The most serious and dangerous abuses being reported were attributed to the Halliburton Corp. and its subsidiaries. Halliburton was led by Vice President Dick Cheney before his election to that office. While CEO, Cheney had massively expanded Halliburton's very profitable consumption of federal contracts.

In December 2003, the New York Times reported that Halliburton was charging almost twice as much to transport gasoline from Kuwait into Iraq as other suppliers. Department of Defense auditors had questioned \$61 million of Halliburton's charges and had rejected another payment. The next day, I publicly called upon Chairman Coleman to have his investigations subcommittee, of which I was a member, investigate these and other reported abuses by Halliburton.

Coleman responded, "At this point, I'm not taking his request very serious."

The next day, I personally sent Coleman a handwritten note to clarify the seriousness of my intentions. A few days later, I repeated my request in a formal letter. In it, I pointed out that Halliburton had been given \$15.6 billion in Iraqi contracts without competitive bidding. The director of the Defense Contract Audit Agency had stated publicly Halliburton's misdeeds were "worthy of immediate action."

I never received a reply to my letter. What is more important, Coleman refused to investigate the continuing reports of widespread abuses by Halliburton, its then-subsubsidiary KBR or other Iraqi contractors with close Republican connections. He did make one inquiry into KBR's supplying contaminated water to American troops. That contemptible practice, however, had already been exposed and resolved.

If Coleman had been interested, he might have uncovered even worse and continuing abuses:

As many as 12 American soldiers have been electrocuted in Iraq due to faulty wiring in buildings maintained by KBR, including one serviceman who was killed while showering in January

Halliburton served our troops food that had spoiled or passed its expiration date. Additionally, Halliburton's former food production manager testified the company charged the government for as many as 10,000 meals a day it never served.

The top civilian at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers called Halliburton's no-bid contract the worst case of contract abuse she had ever seen. Halliburton reportedly overcharged by more than 600 percent for its fuel delivery. It also failed to complete the work required by the contract, which left distribution points unusable.

Throughout 2003, U.S. soldiers guarding KBR's Qarmat Ali water injection plant were exposed to sodium dichromate, a highly toxic substance that causes a

variety of chronic and fatal illnesses. Although KBR told soldiers the orange dust coating the facility was a "mild irritant," the development of thyroid problems and early signs of cancer among plant workers caused KBR to admit the dust was indeed toxic.

Harry Truman once famously said, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Had Coleman pursued this and other evidence of dangerous abuses by Halliburton and others, he would undoubtedly have received considerable heat, starting with the Office of the Vice President. However, by failing to meet his responsibilities, he left thousands of courageous American soldiers wrongly exposed to unsafe conditions. By failing them, Sen. Coleman failed us.

Mark Dayton, a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, was elected to the U.S. Senate from Minnesota in 2000 and chose not to run for re-election in 2006. He lives in Minneapolis