

Truman, redux

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In "Plain Speaking," Merle Miller's biography of President Harry S. Truman, Truman recalled the time his Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program looked into charges that an aircraft manufacturer knowingly was installing defective engines into planes it was delivering to combat forces .

"So we went down, myself and a couple of other senators, and we condemned more than four or five hundred of those engines," Truman said. "And I sent a couple of those generals who'd been approving, who'd okayed those engines, to Leavenworth (Federal Penitentiary), and I believe they are still there. I certainly hope so."

Actually, only one general went to prison, but the fact remains that not since the Truman Committee of World War II has Congress truly been interested in reforming defense contracting. From time to time, efforts have been made to resurrect the Truman Committee, but they have foundered in the Bermuda Triangle that is the Pentagon, its contractors and the contractors' friends in Congress.

Undaunted, freshman Sens. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., and Jim Webb, D-Va., on Wednesday again invoked Truman's memory in introducing a bill to create an independent commission on wartime contracting.

The bill would extend the authority of Stuart Bowen Jr., the Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. Bowen would report to a bipartisan eight-member commission modeled along the lines of the 9/11 Commission and charged with investigating the way that \$450 billion has spent on the Iraq War. Its first report would be due in one year.

McCaskill said Wednesday that she'd been appalled by what she'd learned about U.S. contracting efforts during a recent trip to Iraq.

The United States is outsourcing hundreds of wartime jobs to private contractors, she said, "and military commanders don't have enough training in contracting issues. They don't have responsibility for performance measures, for reviewing contracts. The contracts are specific enough. These blank-check contracts are a license to steal, especially when there's no one to report to. I had one commander tell me, 'Hey, I've got seven kinds of ice cream in the mess hall. I'm happy.' I had a general say, 'I know it costs \$10 billion, but if it cost \$15 billion, it wouldn't bother me.' They're not being held accountable for the failures of contracting."

McCaskill said the Iraq Contracting Commission would have the authority to look in every contract in place in Iraq. Right now, Bowen's commission is limited to auditing \$22 billion in relief and reconstruction funds, but even that has almost overwhelmed him. "He's got 61 investigations currently open, and some of them have the potential for criminal charges," McCaskill said.

McCaskill and Webb are onto something. Oversight and accountability are desperately lacking on Iraq war spending, but are also needed throughout the \$500 billion-plus Defense Department budget.

There are thousands of auditors in the Pentagon, the Government Accountability Office and throughout the rest of the federal government, but every year the Pentagon outsources more of its duties to private contractors. As The New York Times reported recently, even part of the defense auditing program has been outsourced to private contractors. And every one of those contractors has friends in high places.

So what is to prevent McCaskill and Webb's commission from foundering in the same Pentagon Bermuda Triangle that has claimed so many other Truman Committee wanna-bes?

"A lot of this has to do with not losing interest," McCaskill said. "It can't be just the flavor of the month. One of the things that's going to have to happen is that some generals will have to start losing their jobs."

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. CNS.

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