

Democrats try to woo voters in Bay Area Gephardt, Lieberman slam Bush administration for its handling of Iraq situation

Herbert A. Sample
Bee San Francisco Bureau, SAN FRANCISCO
Sacramento Bee
July 23, 2003

Democratic presidential hopeful Dick Gephardt, though insisting that the war in Iraq was justified, nonetheless criticized the Bush administration Tuesday for bungled diplomacy and strained relations with allies.

Gephardt, the former House Democratic leader from Missouri, told a meeting of the Bar Association of San Francisco that the "bravado" of President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney "has left us isolated in the world."

"I'm seeking the presidency because foreign policy isn't a John Wayne movie, where we catch the bad guys, hoist a few cold ones and then everything fades to black," the congressman said. "Diplomacy matters. Burden-sharing matters. Follow-through matters."

Gephardt's speech was delivered on the same day that two sons of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein were killed in northern Iraq, and a top White House national security official apologized for allowing unproven claims about Iraq's alleged quest for uranium ore into Bush's State of the Union speech in January.

And on Monday, a new Field Poll of California Democrats indicated a fluid race led by former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, whose standing has been aided in part by his outspoken criticism of Bush's Iraq policy before and after the war. Gephardt finished fourth in the poll. Gephardt, in comments to reporters following his address, said the deaths of Odai and Qusai Hussein "obviously is a step we look on with positive feelings."

Gephardt said he remained unapologetic about his support for the war. He said he relied on intelligence reports compiled by the Bush and Clinton administrations, other countries, and United Nations inspectors that Iraq either possessed or could quickly assemble nuclear, biological and/or chemical arms.

"I believed then, and I believe now," he said during his speech. "Either Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction or components of weapons of mass destruction."

But Bush's withdrawal from treaties on anti-ballistic missile systems, global warming and the International Criminal Court disenchanted U.S. allies, Gephardt said. That led to the president's failure to win United Nations sanctions before the war, and the difficulty Bush is having now persuading other countries to contribute peacekeeping troops, he asserted.

"This looming quagmire is on our shoulders alone," the congressman said. "If you ask me, that's a failure of diplomacy, of foreign policy,

of plain old American leadership, and of the Bush-Cheney insistence on shutting out the world."

Gephardt also said Bush should accept blame for the State of the Union assertions that Iraq sought uranium ore from Niger. To refuse responsibility damages the president's and the nation's credibility, he added.

"Nor does it matter, in the administration's constant refrain, that it was just 16 words," Gephardt said. "Let's be clear. The Republicans leveled articles of impeachment for a far smaller number of words."

He was apparently referring to the GOP-led impeachment in 1998 of then-President Clinton.

Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, one of Gephardt's main rivals who toured a high-technology firm in Palo Alto on Tuesday, also lauded the death of Saddam's sons.

"You'd have to say that was an act of justice," Lieberman told reporters, citing the "tens of thousands of deaths" Saddam and his two sons caused among Iraqis, Iranians and Kurds.

Like Gephardt, Lieberman, who finished third in this week's Field Poll, supported the war in Iraq and has been critical of Bush's policies since major combat ended.

"The Bush administration's handling of post-Saddam Iraq has been stunningly inept," he said. The administration, the senator added, has been too slow to place Iraqis back in control of their own government and oil industry, and to seek United Nations rebuilding assistance.

Lieberman toured Nanosys, a firm that is developing nanotechnology - a burgeoning field involving devices of microscopic size. He used the event to promote a jobs plan he said would revitalize the high-tech industry and create well-paying jobs.