

## Steamroller Out of Steam

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

Published: November 24, 2004    ashington — The sore-loser set has been complaining that the president has banished healthy internal dissent. Darryl Zanuck's classic line to quavering executives has been evoked, "Don't say yes until I finish talking!"

But wait: that was before a minority of a hundred or so members of Congress, basing their stand on the testimony of the nation's five most senior military officers, refused to say yes to the private lobbying juggernaut set up by the disbanded 9/11 commission. This group had already brought the media, the Congressional leadership and finally the president to their knees.

The principled refusal of two House committee chairmen to be steamrolled into hasty passage of a pre-election-driven bill has flipped the previous bashing of the supposedly domineering Bush 180 degrees.

Now the party line is: "Whatsamatter, W., you can't whip these right-wingers of yours into line? The Establishment has decreed that our intelligence operations will be reorganized now, quick, before the new Congress takes the oath and holds further hearings. Why can't you force your generals and your saluting solons to get with the program? Where's Tom (the Hammer) DeLay when we need him?"

That's quite a flip-flop. As for me, I prefer the original complaint: a president needs close-in, loyalist dissent. I resist the steamroller, whether by a president who demands lockstep obedience or by a brilliant P.R. campaign financed by six foundations yet to reveal their names (except for Carnegie Corporation, on its Web site, down for \$200,000).

Hero of the steamroller stoppage is Representative Duncan Hunter, chairman of House Armed Services, whose committee heard testimony from each of the four service chiefs about a letter from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Richard Myers. These officers made clear their worry about what some of us consider an unnecessary bureaucratic layer between highly perishable military intelligence and troops in the field.

Their testimony was derided by horrified editorialists and senators who look with disdain on the House as merely a desire to protect budgetary "turf." Might it not be possible that these decorated officers were not puppets being manipulated by nefarious neocons, but stand-up guys who actually believed what they said - and were duty-bound to give Congress their best advice about the way postmodern war must be waged?

I'd like the next Congress to take a hard look at a radical notion in the current bill - to strip the C.I.A. of its covert-action arm and assign that function to the Pentagon. That

calls for all-out war or no action at all - when sometimes it is wise to operate in the gray area of plausible denial.

The Senate bill, which slavishly follows the commission's recommendations, has some sensible ideas; the counterterrorism center for dot connection is one. And the superczar role will do no harm, especially since the watered-down proposal makes him less of a budgetary superpower and a potential rival to the president in a crisis.

In today's conventional media narrative, the Senate is heroically seeking to reform the dysfunctional C.I.A.; the villainous majority in the House is soft on terror; and the Machiavellian president is publicly posing as a reacher-outer, but is privately telling the House to drag a foot to protect the Pentagon. The K.G.B. had a name for that: disinformation.

The truth is that Senate intelligence oversight has long been as inept and blundering as the C.I.A., which at least is now getting its overdue shakeup.

Example: five months ago, I discovered that since 2002 the Senate Intelligence Committee had suppressed its own 30-page report on the terrorist attack on the U.S.S. Cole, which cost 16 sailors' lives two years before. When asked for its release, the staff director said the report was still "classified." I requested its C.I.A. clearance, which took three long months to do; the C.I.A. informs me it has finally been redacted and returned, unclassified, to the committee.

But Pat Roberts, the chairman, is said to think that the suppressed report is "disputatious." He won't make it public. Why? I suspect it may put not just the C.I.A. and F.B.I. but some senators and committee staff in a bad light.

Lame ducks shouldn't stampede. "Evolving" intelligence reform should be an early priority for the 109th Congress.