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THREATS AND RESPONSES: BIPARTISAN HAWKS; New Group Will Lobby For Change In Iraqi Rule

By Eric Schmitt

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Seeking to increase domestic and international support for a new government in Iraq, an independent bipartisan group has been formed with the White House's tacit approval to press for the ouster of Saddam Hussein.

Members of the hawkish group, the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, include former Secretary of State George P. Shultz, former Senator Bob Kerrey, the Teamsters leader James P. Hoffa and the former House speaker, Newt Gingrich. Senators John McCain, Republican of Arizona, and Joseph I. Lieberman, Democrat of Connecticut, are expected to be the group's hononary Congressional co-chairmen.

The committee is modeled on a successful lobbying campaign to expand the NATO alliance, and will engage in advocacy and educational efforts in the United States and Europe aimed at ''freeing the Iraqi people from tyranny,'' the group's mission statement says.

On Friday, members are to meet at the White House with Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, to encourage a long-term American commitment to developing democratic institutions in Iraq after Mr. Hussein is gone -- whether as a result of a coup or an American-led military offensive.

''We don't believe in hit-and-run interventionism,'' said Bruce Jackson, the Reagan-era Pentagon official who is the committee's chairman.

Operating from a row-house office near Capitol Hill on less than $25,000 in seed money from Mr. Jackson and Julie Finley, a Republican fund-raiser, the committee plans to borrow many of the same low-budget methods used in the NATO enlargement campaign to spread its message. Those will include making contact with journalists, holding dinner sessions with administration officials and meeting with editorial boards.

With United Nations weapons inspectors expected to arrive soon in Iraq, committee organizers say they fear public support for removing Mr. Hussein and rebuilding Iraq's political and economic institutions could slip without steady pressure.

''Support is never as deep as you'd like it,'' said Randy Scheunemann, the group's president and a former aide to Republican senators Bob Dole and Trent Lott. ''We're looking at getting outside of Washington, from Spokane to Wichita.''

Mr. Scheunemann said committee members would also give the administration ''a gut check'' on its Iraq policies, especially on evolving a plan for governing a post-Hussein Iraq.

Some committee members were critical of the administration's handling of the disparate Iraqi opposition groups. ''I am disappointed we haven't done more with the opposition groups earlier, not just militarily but politically,'' said Wayne A. Downing, a retired Army general who was until recently Mr. Bush's principal adviser on terrorism.

Senator Kerrey, a former Nebraska Democrat who is now president of the New School University in Manhattan, said ousting Mr. Hussein would benefit Iraq's long oppressed citizenry. ''There is a moral case for this beyond just the political arguments,'' he said.