Bush 'is on brink of catastrophe'

FROM ROLAND WATSON IN WASHINGTON

THE most senior Republican authority on foreign relations in Congress has warned President Bush that the United States is on the brink of catastrophe in Iraq.

Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that Washington was in danger of creating “an incubator for terrorist cells and activity” unless it increased the scope and cost of its reconstruction efforts. He said that more troops, billions more dollars and a longer commitment were needed if the US were not to throw away the peace.

Mr Lugar’s warning came as it emerged that the CIA has launched a review of its pre-war intelligence on Iraq to check if the US exaggerated the threats posed by Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. The review is intended to determine if the Pentagon manipulated the assessment of intelligence material for political ends.

Democrats have begun to say that the US is in danger of jeopardising the success of the military action in Iraq, but Mr Lugar is by far the most senior Republican to break ranks with the White House over the issue. Mr Lugar, a moderate who expressed initial reservations about the war, said that the Government’s planning for post-war Iraq had clearly been inadequate.

“I am concerned that the Bush Administration and Congress have not yet faced up to the true size of the task that lies ahead, or prepared the American people for it,” he said, writing in The Washington Post. Mr Bush should state clearly “that we are engaged in ‘nation-building’,” he said, a statement that would require the President to swallow one of his tenets of the 2000 election campaign.

Speaking derisively of President Clinton’s foreign policy, Mr Bush said it was not the role of US troops to nation-build.

Mr Lugar also took a swipe at Mr Bush’s victory speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln earlier this month, delivered under a banner that read: “Mission Accomplished”. He said: “President Bush should make clear to one and all that he will declare ‘Mission Accomplished’ in Iraq not on the basis of our military victory or the date of our withdrawal, but on what kind of country we leave behind.”

It would be irresponsible, and contrary to USinterests, to walk away before Iraq was a dependable member of the world community.

Mr Lugar’s remarks are likely to infuriate the White House and the Pentagon. He criticised Pentagon officials for talking about “quick exit strategies”, saying: “The days when Americans could win battles and
then come home quickly for a parade are over."

The ability of the White House to fire back at Mr Lugar is limited. Mr Bush described him last week as "a fine, fine man", after being introduced by him at a speech in Indiana.

Mr Lugar did not mention the withdrawal of Jay Garner, who was put in to run the initial stages of the rebuilding of post-war Iraq, and whose tenure is increasingly regarded as a disaster. But the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is preparing to hold hearings to press the Administration on the shortcomings of plans for post-war Iraq, and to assess planning for the future.

"I want to see evidence that the Administration is in this for the long haul to create a stable, democratic Iraq, and to acknowledge that this will place a significant burden on the American people," Mr Lugar said. He referred to estimates that the reconstruction of Iraq may cost $100 billion, compared to the $2.5 billion approved by Congress so far.