

Is Cheney Right? Will Democrats Cave on Iraq Funding?

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Region: [USA](#)

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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

The rhetoric over recent days and this morning makes it clear that Vice President Dick Cheney is still in charge of Iraq policy. He seems supremely confident that the Democrats can be intimidated into giving the White House the only thing it really wants - enough money to stave off defeat until President George W. Bush and Cheney are safely out of office. That, of course, is also what lies behind the "temporary surge" in troop strength.

Was Defense Secretary Robert Gates being naive or disingenuous on January 11, when he appeared before the Senate Armed Forces Committee and addressed the "surge?"

I don't think anybody has a definite idea about how long the surge would last. I think for most of us, in our minds, we're thinking of it as a matter of months, not 18 months or two years.

I know Gates; he is not naive. And, whatever the relative merits of positions on a policy issue, neither he nor anyone else in the small coterie of presidential advisers is likely to stand up to Cheney. The \$64 question is whether the Democrats will. To me, that appears a long shot.

On CBS's "Face the Nation" yesterday, Cheney could barely suppress a smirk in expressing confidence that the Democrats in the end will cave in and, as he put it, "not leave America's fighting forces in harm's way without the resources they need to defend themselves." And yes, the vice president went on to reassure viewers - against all evidence to the contrary - "We are making progress."

While our corporate media remain allergic to analyzing the administration's true intentions, Democrats cannot fail to see the White House game for what it is. Will they be frightened into acquiescing in the certain deaths of 1,000 to 1,500 more American troops already "in harm's way," and the wounding of several times that number - not to mention the mounting casualties among Iraqis?

It appears they will.

While some Democrats in Congress have shown backbone since becoming the majority, key members like Senate Armed Services Committee Chair Carl Levin of Michigan seem willing to acquiesce in giving Cheney and Bush funding to continue the war, no matter what. On April 8, right after Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid announced he would cosponsor legislation cutting off all funding for combat troops next March, Levin undercut Reid by telling ABC's "This Week," "We're not going to vote to cut the funding, period.... We're not

going to cut off funding for the troops. We shouldn't cut off funding for the troops.... We're going to vote for a bill that funds the troops, period. We're going to fund the troops. We always have."

Do you want me to repeat that?

Levin is a smart fellow, but his progressive credentials have been tarnished by his caving in on funding for an unworkable National Missile Defense project; by his working out an unsavory compromise with Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) on depriving detainees of rights formerly guaranteed them by the US Constitution. And now this.

What would prompt Levin to pre-empt his own majority leader? One possible explanation might be found in the chutzpah-laden admonitions coming from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, and the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) cheerleaders for Cheney, who do not disguise their fervor for the US continuing the war in Iraq. Their gratuitous warnings at last month's AIPAC meeting in Washington that US politicians not show "weakness" on Iraq spring from their conviction that withdrawal of US troops would make the neighborhood more dangerous for Israel. (Israeli politicians should have thought of that before goading Bush and Cheney into attacking Iraq in the first place.)

Senator Levin has received more money from AIPAC than any other senator. It seems an open question whether he is influenced more by the money or by a penchant - akin to that of Republican "neo-conservatives" - to see little or no daylight between what they perceive to be Israel's interests and those of the United States.

Perhaps there is a simpler explanation. If there is, Levin owes it to us. Yesterday he waffled some more, telling Fox News Sunday that, if the president vetoes a troop withdrawal date, Congress will try to approve a bill with "some very strong, clear, statement about the Iraqis needing to meet our benchmarks, and consequences if they don't."

Right. That is sure to work with Bush, Cheney, and Iraqi leaders, who continue to play senior US officials like a violin. If that is the kind of cowardly "compromise" Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi accommodate to after talking with the president on Wednesday, let everyone know that they do so over the dead bodies of countless thousands more Americans and Iraqis.

No Give From Bush

President Bush was well-scripted for his White House East Room performance this morning, at which he used the bereaved spouses and children of fallen troops as a backdrop to repeat his familiar bromides for continued war in Iraq. The well-worn rhetorical flourishes were all there, relevant or not: two shameless allusions to September 11 (as if that had anything to do with Iraq); the need to fight over there, "so that we don't have to face [the terrorists] where you live;" refusal to countenance "arbitrary dates" or an "artificial timetable" for "precipitous withdrawal."

There was no sign in the East Room of any White House intention to compromise on key points; rather, the lines are now clearly drawn.

Immediately after the president's presentation, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and two retired US Army generals responded. The generals went on the offensive, showing the

military strategy and tactics on Iraq, particularly the surge, to be misguided and counterproductive. Reid, however, was perceptively on the defensive. He gave pride of place to repeated assurances that “Congress is committed to fully funding the troops,” adding that draft legislation gives the president \$4.3 billion more than he even asked for. He then suggested, in a plaintive tone, said that the president “should listen to us.” Fat chance.

Asked about Senator Levin’s unusual behavior, Reid finessed his answer, referring to the possibility of benchmarks and stressing that the president “is not going to get a bill that has nothing on it,” even if he vetoes the first one. Reid added, “Senator Levin is one of my strong allies, one of my generals; I look to him for guidance and leadership.

A harbinger of Democratic cave-in on Wednesday, absent an immediate backbone transplant for Senator Reid.

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