

Senate passes Iraq war spending bill, paving way to Bush veto

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The Senate's narrow approval of a \$124 billion war spending bill Thursday has brought the current phase of the drawn-out war of words between the Bush White House and the Democratic-led Congress over Iraq one step closer to resolution. The bill, passed by the House the day before, will arrive on Bush's desk early next week to be promptly vetoed.

The Senate passed the supplemental funding measure by a vote of 51-to-46, with two Republicans, Chuck Hagel of Nebraska and Gordon Smith of Oregon, voting with the Democratic majority. Joining the Republicans in voting against was Joseph Lieberman, who lost the Democratic primary in Connecticut because of his support for the Bush administration's war policy but then won the general election as an independent. Two Republicans and one Democrat did not vote.

On Wednesday evening, the House approved the same joint legislation, voting 218 to 208. Two Republicans crossed party lines to vote for it, while 13 Democrats opposed the measure, split near evenly between those who opposed funding for the war and those who opposed placing restrictions on the conduct of the war as a condition for the funding.

Calling the bill "defeatist legislation that insists on a date for surrender, micromanages our commanders and generals in combat zones from 6,000 miles away, and adds billions of dollars in spending unrelated to the fighting on the ground," White House spokeswoman Dana Perino repeated Bush's vow to veto the measure.

While media reports on the Congressional legislation routinely refer to it as a plan for the withdrawal of US troops from occupied Iraq and ending the war, the language of the bill makes clear that what is involved is a tactical "redeployment" that would leave tens of thousands of US soldiers and marines in Iraq for years to come.

The bill incorporates "benchmarks" to be achieved by the Iraqi government that were spelled out by Bush himself as part of the escalation of the war initiated early this year. Included among them is the passage of new oil legislation that would open up Iraq's vast reserves to exploitation by US energy conglomerates.

The legislation proposes that "redeployment" begin by next October—while giving no indication of what number of troops it proposes be withdrawn at that time—and be completed by March of 2008. This timetable is not binding, but merely a goal suggested by the legislation.

The bill includes a provision for keeping US armed forces in Iraq for three purposes: "protecting United States and coalition personnel and infrastructure; training and equipping

Iraqi forces and conducting targeted counter-terrorism operation.”

This language would essentially allow the occupation and war to continue indefinitely, with US troops deployed to protect a massive new embassy being constructed in Baghdad to house a virtual colonial government and to guard “American citizens” sent by the oil companies to reap massive profits off of Iraq’s oil fields. At the same time, under the cover of a struggle against “al-Qaeda,” proclaimed by the senior US commander in Iraq Gen. David Petraeus as “enemy number one,” US troops would remain embroiled in a dirty counterinsurgency campaign aimed at crushing the resistance of the Iraqi people.

Democratic leaders stressed that the legislation was aimed at pursuing the same aims for which the war was launched, albeit by different means.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said at a Capitol Hill press conference Thursday that the bill “takes us in a new direction in Iraq,” as opposed to out of Iraq.

She stressed that, by placing US combat troops “in the middle of a civil war,” the Bush administration was acting to “diminish our capacity to fight the war on terrorism, to fight any threat to the interest of the United States wherever it may occur, at home or abroad.”

Pelosi, like other Democratic leaders, stressed that the legislation had provided even more funding for the war than the White House had requested.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid sounded the same theme, declaring that the newly passed spending bill “helps us more effectively fight terrorism and strengthens United States security. It redeploys our troops out of a civil war. It ensures our troops are combat-ready before deployed to Iraq. It provides them with all the resources needed in the battlefield and also when they return from the battlefield.”

Thus, the differences separating the Democrats and Congress and the Bush White House are not between an anti-war faction and a pro-war one, but rather between two pro-war parties, vying over the best tactical means of pursuing the US campaign of neo-colonial aggression in Iraq.

While the Democrats cynically invoke the overwhelming popular opposition to the war as an argument in support of their proposals, the concrete measures they are advancing in no way reflect the mass sentiment for an end to the US aggression in Iraq and the withdrawal of all US troops. While it was this mass antiwar sentiment that gave the Democrats control of both houses of Congress in last November’s midterm election, the party leadership has no intention of acting on this mandate.

Poll: 57 percent for total US withdrawal

A Rasmussen poll published the same day as the Senate vote showed that a clear majority of the American people, 57 percent, favors a rapid and complete pullout of all American troops from Iraq—37 percent immediately, another 20 percent with a deadline in the coming months. Among Democratic voters, a staggering 78 percent favor total withdrawal, and a majority, 54 percent, favor withdrawing immediately.

But such is the disenfranchisement of the American people by the two big business parties that not single leader in the Congressional leadership advocates immediate withdrawal from

Iraq.

Given the tactical character of the differences between the Democrats and Republicans, the bitter and belligerent character of the debate over the funding bill is all the more striking.

The Bush administration and its supporters have denounced the Democratic leadership for surrendering to the enemy, aiding terrorism and even “treason.”

The Republican right unleashed a furor in response to the statement by Senate Majority Leader Reid last week that “this war is lost,” a viewpoint held, according to recent opinion polls, by a majority of the American people.

Never mind that the Democratic Senate leader quickly clarified his party’s support for continuing the war through different tactics and its opposition to a US withdrawal. “It’s time for us to change direction in Iraq ... Redeploy the troops” Reid said.

He added, “Does that mean pull them out? No, it doesn’t. But it does mean the troops that are there should focus on counterterrorism, force protection, and training the Iraqis.”

Republicans condemned him for “defeatism” and claimed the comment would undermine US troop morale. Vice President Dick Cheney called the comment a “cynical” attempt to secure “political advantage.”

Meanwhile, Tom DeLay the former Texas congressman and Republican House majority leader, declared Reid guilty of treason. “In the time of war, with soldiers dying on the ground, announcing that we had lost the war is very close to treasonous,” he said in an interview with the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review editorial board

Reid, for his part, denounced Cheney as Bush’s “chief attack dog.”

The super-heated rhetoric in Washington is symptomatic of a deep-going political crisis and sharp divisions in Washington over the debacle in Iraq.

Within every section of the American ruling elite there are deep fears over the implications that a defeat in Iraq will have for the global position of US imperialism, the danger that it would embolden Washington’s economic rivals and, above all, encourage struggles of the working class internationally and within the US itself.

A significant section of the American ruling establishment has lost confidence in the Bush administration’s ability to salvage US interests in Iraq, while others fear that any hint of a pullback from the US war will only hasten a full-scale rout.

It is in this political context that the Democratic Party has come forward with its legislative initiative—a bill that it claims is aimed at ending the war, while providing nearly \$100 billion more to pay for it and laying out a concrete framework and justification for keeping US troops in Iraq for years if not decades to come.

The aim of the party’s leadership is to provide the ruling elite with a more rational policy for prosecuting the military struggle for US control of the Middle East and its oil resources, while at the same time posturing as an opponent of war in order to better control and contain the intense and widening opposition to the war within the American population.

As part of the Republican baiting of Reid following his “war is lost” statement, White House spokeswoman Perino commented, “If this is his true feeling, then it makes one wonder if he has the courage of his convictions and therefore will decide to defund the war.”

Of course, the Democratic majority in Congress has the constitutional power to do just that, refusing to vote another cent for the slaughter in Iraq and thereby bringing it to an end. The White House knows full well that Reid and the Democrats have no intention of using that power, because in the end, they too are an imperialist, pro-war party, committed to continuing the use of military force to achieve the aims and interests of the US-based banks and corporations.

Instead, the Democrats are already working on yet another compromise, which will inevitably provide the money to continue the war without even the fig leaf of suggesting a partial withdrawal.

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