

The New War Congress: An Obama-Republican War Alliance?

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To understand just how bad the 112th Congress, elected on November 2nd and taking office on January 3rd, is likely to be for peace on Earth, one has to understand how incredibly awful the 110th and 111th Congresses have been during the past four years and then measure the ways in which things are likely to become even worse.

Oddly enough, doing so brings some surprising silver linings into view.

The House and Senate have had Democratic majorities for the past four years. In January, the House will be run by Republicans, while the Democratic majority in the Senate will shrink. We still tend to call the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan “Bush’s wars.” Republicans are often the most outspoken supporters of these wars, while many Democrats label themselves “critics” and “opponents.”

Such wars, however, can’t happen without funding, and the past four years of funding alone amount to a longer period of war-making than U.S. participation in either of the world wars. We tend to think of those past four years as a winding down of “Bush’s wars,” even though in that period Congress actually appropriated funding to escalate the war in Iraq and then the war in Afghanistan, before the U.S. troop presence in Iraq was reduced.

But here’s the curious thing: while the Democrats suffered a net loss of more than 60 seats in the House in the midterm elections just past, only three of the defeated Democrats had [voted](#) against funding an escalation in Afghanistan this past July 27th. Three other anti-war Democrats (by which I mean those who have actually voted against war funding) retired this year, as did two anti-war Republicans. Another anti-war Democrat, Carolyn Kilpatrick of Michigan, lost in a primary to Congressman-elect Hansen Clarke, who is also likely to vote against war funding. And one more anti-war Democrat, Dan Maffei from western New York, is in a race that still hasn’t been decided. But among the 102 Democrats and 12 Republicans who voted “no” to funding the Afghan War escalation in July, at least 104 will be back in the 112th Congress.

That July vote proved a high point in several years of efforts by the peace movement, efforts not always on the media’s radar, to persuade members of Congress to stop funding our wars. Still a long way off from the 218-vote majority needed to succeed, there’s no reason to believe that anti-war congress members won’t see their numbers continue to climb above 114 — especially with popular support for the Afghan War [sinking fast](#) — if a bill to fund primarily war is brought to a vote in 2011.

Which President Will Obama Be in 2012?

The July funding vote also marked a transition to the coming Republican House in that more Republicans (160) voted “yes” than Democrats (148). That gap is likely to widen. The Democrats will have fewer than 100 House Members in January who haven’t already turned against America’s most recent wars. The Republicans will have about 225. Assuming a libertarian influence does not sweep through the Republican caucus, and assuming the Democrats don’t regress in their path toward peace-making, we are likely to see wars that will be considered by Americans in the years to come as Republican-Obama (or Obama-Republican) in nature.

The notion of a war alliance between the Republicans and the president they love to hate may sound outlandish, but commentators like Jeff Cohen who have paid attention to the paths [charted](#) by Bill Clinton’s presidency have been raising this possibility since Barack Obama entered the Oval Office. That doesn’t mean it won’t be awkward. The new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), for example, is aimed at reducing the deployment and potential for proliferation of nuclear weapons. Obama supports it. Last week, we watched the spectacle of Republican senators who previously expressed support for the treaty turning against it, apparently placing opposition to the president ahead of their own views on national security.

That does not, however, mean that they are likely to place opposition to the President ahead of their support for wars that ultimately weaken national security. In fact, it’s quite possible that, in 2011, they will try to separate themselves from the president by proposing even more war funding than he asks for and daring him not to sign the bills, or by packaging into war bills measures Obama opposes but not enough to issue a veto.

For Obama’s part, while he has always striven to work with the Republicans, a sharp break with the Democrats will not appeal to him. If the polls were to show that liberals had begun identifying him as the leader of Republican wars, the pressure on him to scale back war-making, especially in Afghanistan, might rise.

If the economy, as expected, does not improve significantly, and if people begin to associate the lack of money for jobs programs with the staggering sums put into the wars, the president might find himself with serious fears about his reelection — or even about getting the Democratic Party’s nomination a second time. His fate is now regularly being compared to that of Bill Clinton, who was indeed reelected in 1996 following a Republican midterm trouncing. (In his successful campaign to return to the Oval Office, Clinton got an assist from Ross Perot, a third-party candidate who drew off Republican votes and whose role might be repeated in 2012 by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.)

History, however, has its own surprises; sometimes it’s the chapters from the past you’re not thinking about that get repeated. Here, for instance, are three presidents who are not Bill Clinton and whose experiences might prove relevant: Lyndon Johnson’s war-making in Vietnam led to his decision not to run for reelection in 1968; opposition to abuses of war powers was likely a factor in similar decisions by Harry Truman in 1952 in the midst of an unpopular war in Korea and James Polk in 1848 after a controversial war against Mexico.

The Unkindest Cut

Bills that fund wars along with the rest of the military and what we have, for the past 62 years, so misleadingly called the “Defense” Department, are harder to persuade Congress

members to vote against than bills primarily funding wars. “Defense” bills and the overall size of the military have been steadily growing every year, including 2010. Oddly enough, even with a Republican Congress filled with warhawks, the possibility still exists that that trend could be reversed.

After all, right-wing forces in (and out of) Washington, D.C., have managed to turn the federal budget deficit into a Saddam-Hussein-style bogeyman. While the goal of many of those promoting this vision of deficit terror may have been intent on getting Wall Street’s fingers into our Social Security savings or defunding public schools, military waste could become collateral damage in the process.

The bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, known on television as “the deficit commission” and on progressive blogs as “the catfood commission” (in honor of what it could leave our senior citizens dining on), has not yet released its proposals for reducing the deficit, but the two chairmen, Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson, have [published](#) their own set of preliminary proposals that include reducing the military budget by \$100 billion. The proposal is, in part, vague but — in a new twist for Washington’s elite — even includes a suggested reduction by one-third in spending on the vast [empire of bases](#) the U.S. controls globally.

Commission member and Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) has [proposed cutting](#) only slightly more — \$110.7 billion — from the military budget as part of a package of reforms that, unlike the chairmen’s proposals, taxes the rich, invests in jobs, and strengthens Social Security. Even if a similar proposal finally makes it out of the full commission, the new Republican House is unlikely to pass anything of the sort unless there is a genuine swell of public pressure.

Far more than \$110.7 billion could, in fact, be cut out of the Pentagon budget to the benefit of national security, and even greater savings could, of course, be had by actually ending the Afghan and Iraq wars, a possibility not considered in these proposals. If military cuts are packaged with major cuts to Social Security or just about anything else, progressives will be as likely as Republicans to oppose the package.

While the new Republican House will fund the wars at least as often and as fulsomely as the outgoing Democratic House, namely 100% of the time, the votes will undoubtedly look different. The Democratic leadership has tended to allow progressive Democrats the opportunity to vote for antiwar measures as amendments to war-funding bills. These measures have ranged from bans on all war funding to requests for non-binding exit strategies. They have not passed, but have generated news coverage. They may also, however, have made it easier for some Democrats to establish their antiwar credentials by voting “yes” on these amendments — before turning around and voting for the war funding. If the funding is the only war vote they are allowed, some of them may be more likely to vote “no.”

On March 10, 2010, Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) used a parliamentary maneuver (that will still be available to him as a member of the minority) to force a lengthy floor debate on a resolution to end the war in Afghanistan. Kucinich has said that he will introduce a similar resolution in January 2011 that would require the war to end by December 31, 2012. That will provide an initial opportunity for Congress watchers to assess the lay of the land in the 112th Congress. It will likely also be the first time that war is powerfully labeled as the property of the president and the Republicans.

The other place public discussion of the wars will occur is in committee hearings, and all of the House committees will now have Republican chairs, including Buck McKeon (R-CA) in Armed Services, and Darrell Issa (R-CA) in Oversight and Government Reform. In recent decades, the oversight committee has only been vigorously used when the chairman has not belonged to the president's party. This was the case in 2007-2008 when Congressman Henry Waxman (D-CA) investigated the Bush administration, even though he did allow high officials and government departments to simply refuse compliance with subpoenas the committee issued. It will be interesting to see how Republican committee chairs respond to a similar defiance of subpoenas during the next two years.

A Hotbed of Military Expansionism

The Armed Services Committee is likely to be a hotbed of military expansionism. Incoming Chairman McKeon wants Afghan War commander General David Petraeus to testify in December (even before he becomes chairman) on the Obama administration's upcoming review of Afghan war policy, while the Pentagon [reportedly](#) does not want him to because there is no good news to report. While Chairman McKeon may insist on such newsworthy witnesses next year, his goal will be war expansion, pure and simple.

In fact, McKeon is eager to [update](#) the 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) to grant the president the ongoing authority to make war on nations never involved in the 9/11 attacks. This will continue to strip Congress of its war-making powers. It will similarly continue to strip Americans of rights like the Fourth Amendment's protection against unreasonable searches and seizures that President Obama has tended to justify more on the basis of the original AUMF than on the alleged inherent powers of the presidency that Bush's lawyers leaned on so heavily.

The president has been making it ever clearer in these post election weeks that he's in no hurry to end the wars in [Iraq](#) or [Afghanistan](#). The scheduled end date for the occupation of Iraq, December 31, 2011, will now arrive while Republicans control a Congress that might conceivably, under Democrats, have been shamed into insisting on its right to finally end that war. [Republicans](#) and their friends at the [Washington Post](#) are now arguing avidly for the continuation of existing wars in the way their side always argues, by pushing the envelope and demanding so much more — such as a war on Iran — that the existing level of madness comes to seem positively sane.

The most silvery of possible silver linings here may lie in the possibility of a reborn peace movement. George W. Bush's new memoir actually reveals the surprising strength the peace movement had achieved by 2006. In that year, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who was publicly denouncing any opposition to war, [privately urged](#) Bush to bring troops out of Iraq before the congressional elections. But that was the last year in which the interests of the peace movement were aligned with those of groups and funders that take their lead from the Democratic Party.

In November 2008, the last of the major funders of the peace movement took their checkbooks and departed. Were they at long last to take this moment to build the opposite of Fox News and the Tea Party, a machine independent of political parties pushing an agenda of peace and justice, anything would be possible.

David Swanson is the author of the just published book [War Is A Lie](#) and Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union. He blogs at [Let's Try Democracy](#)

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