

Congressional Democrats line up behind Bush request for \$80 billion in war spending

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In a statement issued Tuesday, President Bush announced he will request more than \$80 billion in new funding for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This request is expected to face little opposition from congressional Democrats, who have gone out of their way to reaffirm their continued support for the Iraq war.

The Bush administration will formally request the additional military funding after it sends its budget proposal to Congress on February 7. Leading Democrats see the upcoming vote on the funding increase as an opportunity to solidarize themselves with Bush's war policy. The Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, Rep. Nancy Pelosi, stated, "As members of Congress...we have pledged to give our armed forces the support they need in these difficult and dangerous days—both to win this war and to win the peace."

Pelosi enunciated the official line of the Democratic Party, which is to make clear that, whatever criticisms are made of the Bush administration's handling of the war, the Democrats oppose any early withdrawal of US troops and fully support the effort to crush the Iraqi insurgency. By immediately signaling support for the new spending request, Pelosi and her counterparts in the Senate hope to inoculate themselves against any charges from the Republicans of disloyalty or lack of patriotism.

In the recent confirmation hearings for Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state, Joseph Biden, top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, emphasized this point. While he said he was supporting Rice's nomination "with some frustrations and reservations," he cautioned against interpreting some Democratic senators' "no" votes as an indication of opposition to the war.

"Please do not," Biden urged, "read a 'no' vote as not being united in the effort to win in Iraq. That's why some of my colleagues are voting no. They think she's undermined our ability to win in Iraq."

In an effort to further bolster their pro-war image, Senate Democrats have included in their list of priority legislative items a call for adding up to 40,000 new active military troops by 2007.

The Democrats' reaffirmation of their desire to "win in Iraq" comes as US forces face an increasingly precarious situation in the run-up to the January 30 elections. As of January 28, 1,425 US soldiers had been killed in Iraq, with 92 fatalities so far in January alone. US troops suffered the deadliest day in the war last Wednesday, with the loss of 31 soldiers when a Marine helicopter went down in western Iraq and six additional combat deaths in other incidents.

The mounting casualties and increasingly chaotic situation in Iraq are fueling growing disillusionment and opposition within the US population to the government's war policy. According to an Associated Press poll taken in mid-January, 53 percent of Americans believe it is unlikely that a stable, democratic Iraq will be established. The Democratic Party's support for the war stands in direct opposition to widespread and growing antiwar sentiment in the general population and overwhelming hostility to the war among Democratic Party voters.

Democratic constituents who cast their votes for John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election did so in large measure out of opposition to the Bush administration's war policy. While Kerry sought, in the final weeks of the election campaign, to tap into antiwar sentiment, he was never an antiwar candidate. On the contrary, he argued that he would be a more competent and effective "commander in chief," and pledged to do

whatever was necessary to “win” in Iraq.

Kerry, who voted in October 2002 to give Bush authorization to attack Iraq, voted one year later against an \$87.5 billion emergency spending bill for the Iraq war. This was a cynical and calculated move carried out during the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination, at a time when former Vermont governor Howard Dean was riding high in opinion polls among Democratic voters as a result of his appeal to antiwar sentiment. Once Kerry had secured the nomination, he abandoned his antiwar pretences.

The consensus within the leadership of the Democratic Party is that Kerry’s October 2003 vote against the war-spending bill was a disaster—one that will not be repeated.

On Thursday, Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts distanced himself from the official party line by calling for a reduction of troop levels in Iraq. He put forward a plan for the withdrawal of 12,000 US troops following Sunday’s elections, and a complete pullout by early 2006.

Kennedy’s speech reflects growing divisions within the US political establishment and state apparatus over the conduct of the war, and mounting fears that it is leading to a political, and possibly military, disaster. He speaks for those sections of the US establishment who have come to the conclusion that the long-term interests of American imperialism are more endangered by a continuation of the current course in Iraq than by the negative consequences of an early draw-down of the US military presence.

Given the unfolding political disaster in Iraq, the exposure of the administration’s lies, the mounting toll in US deaths and injuries, the signs of growing popular opposition to the war, and the highly destabilizing impact of massive war spending on the US and world financial system, it is notable that Kennedy’s call for an early withdrawal of US troops has garnered to this point virtually no support from within the Democratic Party establishment.

The financial costs of the war are immense. Bush’s latest request will push funding for war operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to a record \$105 billion for fiscal year 2005 alone, including \$25 billion in emergency spending approved last summer. The funding is in addition to the Pentagon budget of more than \$400 billion.

Military operations in Iraq already cost more than \$1 billion a week, and nearly \$300 billion has been spent so far to finance military operations in the two countries. Calculated in 2005 dollars, this is already close to half of what the United States spent for the entire Vietnam War.

In a press briefing last Monday, Lt. Gen. James J. Lovelace, director of Army operations, said that the government’s current plan is to keep 120,000 army troops in Iraq for the next three years (through 2007). Massive funding requests will be needed in future years to fund these troop deployments and other war costs.

The White House has acknowledged that its latest funding request will hike the federal deficit to a record \$427 billion. This projected deficit does not include the cost, estimated at more than a trillion dollars, for Bush’s plan to partially privatize Social Security, or the cost of making permanent the tax cuts enacted in his first term.

These massive deficits will be used to justify unprecedented cuts in domestic social spending. In light of their support for the Iraq war and the fiscal appropriations to sustain it, any talk by Democrats of even the most modest measures to deal with the crisis in health care, education, poverty, or any other social need has no credibility. On the contrary, the Democratic Party is combining support for the war with calls for fiscal austerity.

These developments underscore the political fact that the Iraq war is not “Bush’s war.” It is a bipartisan imperialist venture that reflects the consensus policy of the American ruling elite and both of its parties: to use militarism and war as the foremost means of achieving global hegemony.



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