

Kerry proposes 40,000 more troops, as Democrats back Bush war spending

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Led by Senator John Kerry, the defeated presidential candidate, leading congressional Democrats said this week they would support the \$82 billion supplemental funding bill proposed by the Bush administration to finance its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unlike previous votes on Iraq war spending, not a single prominent Democrat has come out in opposition.

Bush sent the request to Congress on February 14. The request includes \$75 billion for military activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the remaining \$7 billion for reconstruction costs in those two countries, as well as aid for countries devastated by the Asian tsunami, emergency aid to refugees from the Darfur region of Sudan, and funding to establish a new intelligence center under the director of national intelligence.

One portion of the spending underscores the growth of the insurgency fighting the US occupation of Iraq: more than \$12 billion is earmarked to repair or replace tanks, helicopters and other weaponry damaged or destroyed in the war. Another \$5 billion is for restructuring Army divisions into smaller brigade-size formations that the Pentagon believes are more effective in fighting a guerrilla war.

The spending request includes two other notable sums: \$650 million to build a new US embassy in Baghdad, the largest in the world, and \$400 million to reimburse US allies for the cost of deploying their troops in Iraq. The first amount signifies that the Bush administration is spending nearly as much on a new fortress to protect the US overseers of Iraq as its entire outlay on tsunami relief, which totals \$950 million. The second amount is an outright bribe to client states which have dispatched small numbers of troops to give the illusion that the US-British occupation involves a broader “coalition.”

Congressional Democrats criticized the Bush supplemental request on the grounds that it was too small, and promised to introduce amendments that would add as

much as \$8 billion to the overall cost of the emergency bill.

Senator Kerry outlined his proposal in comments to the press Tuesday. He said he would try to attach a proposal to add 40,000 troops to the US military establishment, 30,000 to the Army and 10,000 to the Marines, as well as to raise death benefits for soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and provide other financial compensation for soldiers and their families.

Senator Harry Reid, the Democratic minority leader in the Senate, said, “Getting our troops and their families what they need and deserve has always been a Democratic priority, and the first bill we introduced this Congress reflects the commitment of Sen. Kerry and the rest of the caucus to stand with our troops.” He said the Democratic caucus had adopted the proposed troop increase as one of its top 10 legislative priorities for the current session of Congress.

The Bush administration included the increased death benefit—from \$12,420 to \$100,000—in the emergency spending bill, but limited it to those who die in combat zones, retroactive to the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. Kerry’s version of the benefit would be available to the families of all soldiers whose deaths are service-related, regardless of where they died—an effort to outdo the Republicans in “support our troops” demagoguery.

House Democrats also voiced their support for the war funding bill. House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland declared, “Democrats are hopeful we are successful” in Iraq and Afghanistan, while criticizing the administration for being “extraordinarily wrong” in its cost estimates. John Spratt of South Carolina, the top Democrat on the House Budget Committee, indicated he would vote for the bill, adding, through a spokesman, “He suspects most people will, because we have troops in the field.”

In September 2003, 115 House Democrats voted against

the supplemental military funding bill. This year that number could fall to a handful.

The solidarity of the Democrats with the Bush administration's policy of military intervention in the Middle East was demonstrated as well in their response to the White House threats against Syria. At a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Wednesday, liberal Democrat Barbara Boxer joined with her Republican counterparts in declaring that the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri should be an occasion for stepped-up pressure on Syria. Boxer, a co-sponsor of the Syrian Accountability Act, called on the administration to use the current crisis "to save Lebanon and give to them their independence."

Kerry was among the Senate Democrats who voted against the 2003 war funding bill, in a transparently opportunistic effort to appeal to antiwar sentiment that was fueling the then front-running presidential campaign of Howard Dean. After Kerry won the Democratic nomination, he faced continual attacks by Republicans on the inconsistency of his position, since he had voted in October 2002 to authorize Bush to go to war, and then voted against the money required to carry out the invasion and occupation.

As during the election campaign, Kerry found himself flummoxed as he attempted to explain the twists and turns in his own position on the war—in this case his decision to vote for more money now, after having voted against it in September 2003. He called passage of the new bill "important to our being successful and to the completion of the process." Asked why the same considerations had not applied a year-and-a-half ago, when he was seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, he declared, "Mine was the right vote at the time and I wouldn't change it if we went back to that point in time because it was the right vote. We didn't have a plan and they didn't spend the money correctly."

It would be absurd to suggest that the current situation in Iraq represents progress over the conditions that prevailed in September 2003—when the insurgency was at an embryonic stage and only a few hundred US soldiers had been killed. At that point, the Pentagon was still projecting that most US troops would be out of Iraq sometime in 2004. Now the outlook is for an indefinite full-strength occupation of the country.

On the same day that Bush submitted his supplemental war funding bill, Kerry delivered a speech entitled "Strengthening America's Military" to an audience of veterans in Worcester, Massachusetts, elaborating his

proposal to increase the number of US soldiers. While laced with criticism of the Bush administration's handling of the war in Iraq, Kerry cited a recent CIA National Intelligence Estimate on the prospect of more "failed states" where the US government would be required to intervene. Kerry embraced this perspective, declaring:

"Too many of the planners who designed today's defense policies are still mired in the post-Vietnam doctrine of only fighting 'big wars' against strong hostile states, not wars in and against 'failed states' in which enemy armies are the least of our problems. Wars are won, not merely by breaking the enemy's army, but by breaking his will to fight. But in the decade after the 1991 Gulf War, we built a military prepared to break armies. We've invested in the tools of war and we are supreme in our ability to project force around the world. We've failed to invest sufficiently in the types of forces that win the peace—we've failed to invest in the people, the men and women, who turn battlefield success into strategic victory. Combined with failed diplomacy and poor judgment in Iraq, these failures have produced an Army stretched to the breaking point."

Kerry concluded, "One thing is clear: the American military today is both too small and ill-designed for today's dangers. A force designed for the post-Cold War 1990s is too small for the war on terror and the challenges of the new century. The administration's failure to address this issue, quickly and wisely, has only deepened the hole in which we find ourselves."

Kerry's position demonstrates the folly of any belief that the election of the Democratic candidate last November would have in any significant way changed US policy in Iraq, let alone brought a speedy end to the war. The Democratic Party, like the Republican, is an imperialist party committed to defend the worldwide interests of the American ruling elite. Central to these interests is establishing US hegemonic control over the oil resources of the Middle East and Central Asia, the real motive for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the steady buildup of American military power throughout the region.



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