

Bush faces growing opposition to Iraq war

Patrick Martin
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There are mounting signs that the Bush administration is in disarray over the crisis of its military adventure in Iraq. With the US casualty toll steadily mounting, and opinion polls showing a clear majority of Americans opposing the war and supporting a withdrawal of American troops, Bush has begun to face cautious criticism even within the halls of Congress, which up to now has slavishly supported the US aggression in the Middle East.

Last week the House International Relations Committee adopted a resolution urging the Bush administration to submit a plan for political and military measures that would “permit a decreased US presence” in Iraq. Introduced by New York Democrat Joseph Crowley, the resolution attracted unexpected Republican support, with 13 Republicans, including committee chairman Henry Hyde of Illinois, joining in the 32-9 vote to adopt it.

Four congressmen, two Democrats and two Republicans, introduced a resolution June 16 calling on the administration to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq no later than October 1, 2006. One of the two Republicans, Walter B. Jones of North Carolina, had been a consistent supporter of the war. His district includes the Marine base at Camp Lejeune and two other large military facilities.

While neither resolution would compel any action by the White House, and neither is likely to pass the full House of Representatives, the votes are nonetheless significant. The American public is so clearly turning against the war that even a reactionary Congress controlled by the president’s own party has been compelled to take notice.

White House political strategists have become so concerned about the president’s plummeting poll numbers that Bush has scheduled a major speech on Iraq for June 28, the first anniversary of the establishment of the puppet government in Baghdad, to try to boost public support for his war policy.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said administration officials had to “perhaps try to do more to get out to the public to talk about what it is we are trying to achieve and what it is we are achieving,” suggesting that all that was needed was better packaging of the policy.

Top military spokesmen expressed greater concern about the shift in poll numbers. Marine Lt. Gen. James T. Conway, director of operations for the Pentagon’s Joint Staff, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “It is concerning that our public isn’t as supportive as perhaps they once were. We’d like, I believe, to try to reverse those figures and start the trend back the other direction. Because it’s extremely important to the soldier and the Marine, the airman and the sailor over there, to know that their country’s behind them.”

The Pentagon is having increasing difficulty meeting recruiting quotas for the Army and Marine Corps, the two branches of the military deeply engaged in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. With a constant drumbeat of incidents like Wednesday’s bombing of a convoy near Ramadi, which killed five Marines, the Army is more than a month behind in its 2005 recruitment.

There are also indications of demoralization within the occupation force in Iraq. On Thursday the Army announced that a sergeant had been arrested on two counts of murder for throwing hand grenades that killed his commander and another officer at a base near Tikrit. It was the first instance of “fragging” to take place in Iraq (one previous incident took place in Kuwait just before the US invasion).

Conway explicitly compared the current position in Iraq to the defeat of the United States in Vietnam, which he attributed to the loss of public support. The leaders of the Vietnamese “realized what I think our contemporary enemy realizes—that American public opinion is the center of gravity,” Conway said. “That a democracy can’t do certain things if, in fact, the citizens don’t support it.”

The poll numbers certainly make grim reading for the military brass and the White House spin doctors. A *New York Times/CBS* poll published Friday found a 51 percent majority believing that the US should have stayed out of Iraq, while only 45 percent said the US invasion was correct. Bush’s handling of the war in Iraq drew even less support—only 37 percent approved, down from 45 percent in February. Some 60 percent now believe the war in Iraq is going badly, up from 47 percent in February, just after the January 30 Iraqi elections, which were touted as a great success by US officials and the American media.

A Gallup poll released June 12 found that 59 percent favored an immediate withdrawal of some or all of the US troops in Iraq, up from 37 percent in April 2004.

Bush’s overall approval rating, according to the *New York Times/CBS* poll, stood at 42 percent, the lowest of his presidency and a considerable drop from the 51 percent just after his narrow reelection last November. The four most recent polls have shown a steady downward trend in this figure. Bush’s approval rating was 48 percent in a *Washington Post/ABC* poll, 47 percent in the Gallup poll, and 43 percent in an Ipsos/AP poll.

Each of these polls found growing pessimism about the outcome of the war and a widespread belief that it had been launched on false pretenses. The *Post/ABC* poll found nearly three-quarters of respondents saying the number of casualties in Iraq was unacceptable, two-thirds saying the US military was bogged down, and nearly 60 percent believing the war was not worth fighting. By

a margin of 52-47 percent, those questioned in the *Post/ABC* poll said the war in Iraq had not made the US safer, a sharp reversal from the 38-62 response to the same question in November 2003.

Equally significant, however, are the polls' findings that plunging support for Bush has not been translated into increased support for the Democratic Party, and particularly for the congressional Democrats. While 56 percent in the *Post/ABC* poll disapproved of the congressional Republican leadership—more than disapproved of Bush—an equal number disapproved of the congressional Democrats. The proportion polled who disapproved of Congress as a whole was the highest since late 1998, when a sizeable majority opposed the decision of House Republicans to impeach President Bill Clinton.

While Democrats led Republicans slightly in a generic party preference poll, 46-41, the "favorability" rating for the Democratic Party was only 51 percent, tied for the all-time low. This reflects a deep-seated disillusionment with the whole structure of official politics, with both parties, Democrats as well as Republicans, seen to be controlled by big financial interests and indifferent to the needs of ordinary working people.

A section of the congressional Democrats, after lying low for the duration of the presidential campaign and many months thereafter, is now seeking to win popular support by making anti-war noises. Some 41 Democratic congressmen and congresswomen announced Thursday the formation of an "Out of Iraq" caucus to promote a US withdrawal.

John Conyers, the Detroit congressman who is the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, held an informal hearing Thursday at the Capitol to generate media attention to the new evidence of Bush's lies in the run-up to the war. The hearing featured testimony about the Downing Street memo, the British government document that cites Bush administration efforts in 2002 to "fix" intelligence about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to promote a decision—already made—to wage war against Iraq.

Another leading Democrat, Congressman Charles Rangel of New York, told the hearing that the British memo added to "evidence that appears to be building up that points to whether or not the president has deliberately misled Congress to make the most important decision a president has to make, going to war". Other speakers were less constrained than the Democratic politicians at the hearing, declaring that lying about a war in which thousands of Americans have been killed or wounded and tens of thousands of Iraqis have died was grounds for impeachment.

Afterwards, Conyers and a group of anti-war activists went to the White House to deliver a petition signed by over 560,000 people and endorsed by 110 congressmen asking Bush to respond to allegations about the British memo. The rapid and massive response to the petition, circulated on-line by the liberal organization Move-on.org, is one indication of the widespread opposition to the war.

Despite such posturing, however, not a single member of the House or Senate Democratic leadership has called for an immediate or even partial withdrawal from Iraq. On the contrary, as the *Washington Post* reported earlier this month, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid has been holding meetings with

former Clinton administration officials to discuss a proposal for a sizeable increase in the number of US troops in Iraq.

New York Times foreign policy columnist Thomas Friedman gave a glimpse of the thinking in this camp, when he wrote June 15: "Our core problem in Iraq remains Donald Rumsfeld's disastrous decision—endorsed by President Bush—to invade Iraq on the cheap. From the day the looting started, it has been obvious that we did not have enough troops there." The only way to salvage the debacle in Iraq, he argued, was to "double the American boots on the ground".

In an editorial June 16, the liberal *Baltimore Sun* worried: "An early withdrawal would have serious negative consequences. Iraq would be in danger of exploding into civil war; jihadists would claim they had beaten the American infidels; many Iraqis would feel abandoned by the power that came in and wrecked their country; other Middle Eastern regimes would worry about American steadfastness; the violence could spread to Iran, which could make everything worse. And there's this: The United States would lose control of Iraq's oil fields, the existence of which made Iraq a much more central concern to American policy-makers in the prelude to the war than it otherwise would have been."

The *Sun*'s comment is fairly representative of the editorial commentary in other "liberal," generally pro-Democratic newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Detroit Free Press*. These declarations reek with contempt for public opinion and are brazen in their defense of imperialist interests.

They demonstrate the unbridgeable gulf the separates the liberal wing of the ruling elite, which criticizes Bush for his failure to secure Iraq and its oil wealth, from the masses of American working people, who are increasingly coming to regard the Iraq war as a disaster, and a crime.



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