Political conflict intensifies over Bush's Iraq war lies

Patrick Martin
19 November 2005

The political conflict within US ruling circles over the debacle resulting from the American intervention in Iraq intensified sharply this week. Vice President Dick Cheney denounced Bush's critics as "reprehensible," saying they were "playing politics in the middle of a war," while a leading Democratic war hawk, Congressman John Murtha of Pennsylvania, startled official Washington on Thursday by calling for the immediate withdrawal of US troops in Iraq.

Republican congressmen responded to Murtha's statement with furious denunciations, accusing the congressman of cowardice and all but branding the Democrats as allies of terrorists and traitors. Leading Democrats reacted either by distancing themselves from his remarks, disavowing them, or refusing to comment.

Speaking Wednesday night at a dinner sponsored by the right-wing Frontiers of Freedom Institute, Cheney had escalated the attack on critics of the war begun by Bush in his Veterans Day address in Pennsylvania. Cheney declared that "the suggestion that's been made by some US senators that the president of the United States or any member of this administration purposely misled the American people on pre-war intelligence is one of the most dishonest and reprehensible charges ever aired in this city."

Cheney reiterated Bush's argument that in voting to authorize the war in October 2002, leading congressional Democrats "arrived at the same judgment about Iraq's capabilities and intentions [as] that made by this administration and by the previous administration.... There was broad-based, bipartisan agreement that Saddam Hussein was a threat, that he had violated UN Security Council Resolutions."

"What we're hearing now is some politicians contradicting their own statements and making a play for political advantage in the middle of a war," Cheney continued. "The saddest part is that our people in uniform have been subjected to these cynical and pernicious falsehoods day in and day out."

The duplicity of the vice president's last comment can hardly be overstated. It is true that the US soldiers in Iraq are being subjected to "cynical and pernicious falsehoods day in and day out," but the lies are emanating from the Bush administration, not from opponents of the war. Saddam's supposed weapons of mass destruction, ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda, a Baghdad role in the September 11 terrorist attacks, Iraqis welcoming US soldiers as liberators—these and similar lies have been spread endlessly by the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon and the US media. Within the Bush administration, Cheney himself has played the leading role in their dissemination.

As for the claim by Cheney and Bush that their critics are "playing politics in the middle of a war," that is an accurate description of the methods employed by the Republican administration. Well before the decision to invade Iraq was finalized, in early 2002, Bush's top political aide Karl Rove was telling Republican operatives to plan on using the war as an issue against Democratic opponents in that year's congressional elections—a tactic employed successfully against Senator Max Cleland, a Georgia Democrat and triple amputee in Vietnam who was smeared as unpatriotic.

Bush's reelection campaign in 2004 was based entirely on such fear-mongering and smear tactics, while exploiting the contradictions in the Democratic Party, whose candidate John Kerry supported the war despite the antiwar sentiments of Democratic voters.

Cheney's comments provoked a series of responses from leading Democrats, who reiterated charges of deceiving and misleading, while indicating they still supported a US military victory in Iraq. Senator Kerry said that Cheney "continues to mislead America about how we got into Iraqi and what must be done to complete the still unaccomplished mission."

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid said, "I would urge the members of the Bush administration to stop trying to resurrect their political standing by lashing out at their critics. They need to focus on the job at hand, giving our troops a strategy for success in Iraq."

Former president Bill Clinton, whose support for the war has been widely cited by Bush and his congressional and media apologists, made his most critical remarks about the war in a speech Wednesday to an audience of Arab students in the United Arab Emirates, a Persian Gulf sheikdom which has provided logistics facilities for US military forces.

Clinton called the invasion of Iraq "a big mistake." While still endorsing the initial intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein, Clinton criticized the dismantling of the Iraqi state apparatus, especially the military, and the failure to understand "how hard it would be to unite the country." As a result, "We never sent enough troops and didn't have enough troops to control or seal the borders," Clinton said.

Most significant was the declaration by Murtha, a former Marine intelligence officer and Vietnam veteran and the senior Democrat on the Defense appropriations subcommittee of the House of Representatives. "It is time for a change in direction," he told a Thursday morning press briefing. "Our military is suffering, the future of our country is at risk. We cannot continue on the present course. It is evident that continued military action in Iraq is not in the best interests of the United States of America, the Iraqi people or the Persian Gulf region."

The 16-term congressman called for the pullout of all US troops within six months and said he would introduce a resolution to that effect in the House of Representatives. Murtha was a fervent supporter of the invasion of Iraq, but he said the war was becoming a distraction from more important global threats to US interests that "cannot be ignored," such as Iran and North Korea. He called for maintaining a rapid response military force in the region.

The presence of US troops in Iraq was "uniting the enemy against us," he said. "Our military has accomplished its mission and done its duty. Our military captured Saddam Hussein, captured or killed his closest associates, but the war continues to intensify."

Murtha was particularly bitter about the Bush administration's latest propaganda offensive, including both Cheney's remarks and Bush's

© World Socialist Web Site

earlier speech on November 11. “I resent the fact that on Veterans Day, they criticized Democrats for criticizing them,” Murtha said. Referring to Cheney’s avoidance of military service in the 1960s, he added sarcastically, “I like guys who’ve never been there that criticize us who’ve been there. I like that. I like guys who got five deferments and have never been there and send people to war, and then don’t like to hear suggestions about what needs to be done.”

The Republican speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, responded to Murtha’s press briefing by accusing Murtha of delivering “the highest insult” to US troops, adding, “Murtha and Democratic leaders have adopted a policy of cut and run. They would prefer that the United States surrender to the terrorists who would harm innocent Americans.”

Majority Leader Roy Blunt of Missouri charged that the Democrats “undermine our troops in Iraq from the security of their Washington DC offices.”

Rep. Geoff Davis of Kentucky said the terrorists “have brought the battlefield to the halls of Congress... and frankly, the liberal leadership have ... cooperated with our enemies and are emboldening our enemies.”

The *Wall Street Journal*, in a Friday editorial entitled “Washington Retreat,” denounced Murtha’s statement as indicative of a general waffling of support for Bush’s conduct of the war, declaring bitterly that “American troops can’t be defeated, but American politicians can be.” The *Journal* centered its fire on Senate Republican leaders such as Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner and Majority Leader Bill Frist, attacking them for sponsoring a resolution, passed November 14, that called on the Bush administration to provide Congress with regular updates on the progress of the war.

In his policy prescription, Murtha went well beyond the position adopted by the rest of the congressional Democratic leadership. The *Washington Post*’s Capitol Hill columnist, Dana Milbank, accurately characterized their response to Murtha’s statement and the McCarthyite attacks of the Republicans, writing on November 18, “... Democrats were cutting and running yesterday—not from Iraq, but from Murtha.”

A front-page news article in Friday’s *Post* reported that House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi “had told colleagues at a closed meeting yesterday morning that she, too, would advocate an immediate troop withdrawal, according to several who attended.” But at her afternoon news conference, she was, according to Milbank’s column, “meticulous in avoiding any agreement with Murtha’s ‘very provocative’ statement.”

Milbank recounted the following exchange between the California Democrat and a reporter: “‘But you do agree with the call for immediate withdrawal?’

“‘As I said, that was Mr. Murtha’s statement,’ she replied.”

Giving a picture of the cowardice of Murtha’s Democratic colleagues, Milbank wrote: “In the Speaker’s Lobby off the House floor, Democrats ran for cover. Rep. Norman Dicks (D-Wash.) walked away when reporters asked if Murtha’s move would change the Democrats’ position. Asked if he agreed with Murtha, Rep. Ike Skelton (Mo.), the ranking Democrat on the Armed Service Committee, replied, ‘Talk to you later.’”

Rep. Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, a former aide to Bill Clinton and now head of the House Democrats’ reelection campaign effort, said, “Jack Murtha went out and spoke for Jack Murtha.”

On the Senate side, Democratic Minority Leader Harry Reid said curtly, “I don’t support immediate withdrawal.”

The *New York Times*, reflecting the position of the Democratic Party leadership, published an editorial the morning of Murtha’s press conference criticizing Bush’s conduct of the war while expressly rejecting any early withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

The significance of Murtha’s intervention is underscored by the description of the Pennsylvania congressman published by the Associated Press, which wrote: “First elected to Congress in 1974, Murtha is known as an ally of uniformed officers in the Pentagon and on the battlefield. The perception on Capitol Hill is that when the congressman makes a statement on military issues, he’s talking for those in uniform.”

Murtha’s intervention thus brings to light a conflict which runs right through the US military establishment. A sizeable section of the military brass recognizes that Iraq has become a disaster, not just for the recruitment of new forces, but for maintaining the morale of those currently in military service, especially in units of the Army, Marine Corps and National Guard, which have suffered heavy casualties, including both deaths and crippling wounds.

The officer corps is itself becoming politicized by the conflict over the war—a development that has the most ominous implications for democratic rights. A top US military commander in Iraq made an extraordinary public intervention in the debate going on in Washington, denouncing calls for a timetable for withdrawal of US troops as “a recipe for disaster.”

Only two days after the Senate voted by 58-40 against a Democratic resolution that would have called on the Bush administration to draft such a timetable, Major General William Webster attacked the idea, telling reporters, “Setting a date would mean that the 221 soldiers I’ve lost this year, that their lives will have been lost in vain.” Webster commands the Third Infantry Division, which controls the bulk of Baghdad.

It is highly irregular for an active-duty military officer to comment publicly on a political debate taking place in Congress. The tone of Webster’s remarks amounted to an incitement to the soldiers under his command to reject civilian authority, should Congress or a future president ultimately decide to impose a withdrawal timetable in Iraq.

What must be understood about the escalating debate in official Washington is that it is a conflict with the ruling elite over how best to safeguard the interests of American imperialism. Bush’s Democratic critics are not “antiwar” in any serious sense of the word. They largely backed the Iraq war to begin with and, as the statements of Clinton, Kerry and others demonstrate, they still support the goal of the intervention, which was to seize control of a key oil-producing country and transform it into a US client state.

The Democrats have become more vocal in their criticism, not because of US casualties or the horrors visited upon the Iraqi people, but because of the evident failure of the enterprise, evidenced not only in the ongoing resistance to the US occupation in Iraq, but even more so in the growing hostility to the war among the American people.

They fear, as Murtha emphasized, that the Iraq war now prevents the Pentagon from intervening in any other crisis around the world—not only because it ties down the bulk of deployable US ground forces, but because the brazen lies and aggression have discredited military action in the eyes of the American public.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site