

Uproar in US Congress over Iraq withdrawal vote

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The US House of Representatives was thrown into an uproar Friday when the Republican majority forced a vote on a sham resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.

The measure was placed on the agenda at the conclusion of the House's final pre-vacation session in a bid to embarrass the Democrats and retaliate against Democratic Congressman Jack Murtha of Pennsylvania, who the previous day had called for a pullout of US occupation forces over the next six months.

Murtha's proposal shook politicians in both parties and was an unmistakable sign of the deepening crisis confronting the American intervention in Iraq. The 16-term congressman spent 37 years in the Marine Corps, retiring as a colonel. As a veteran officer and the most experienced congressional figure in defense appropriations, he enjoys the closest ties with the military brass.

The raucous congressional debate came after White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan made the absurd charge that Murtha, a consistent hawk who supported both the first Persian Gulf war and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, was "endorsing the policy positions of Michael Moore and the extreme liberal wing of the Democratic Party." His call for a rapid withdrawal of US troops, McClellan said, amounted to "surrender to the terrorists."

The *New York Times* reported on the House session: "Republicans and Democrats shouted, howled and slung insults on the House floor," adding that the debate "descended into a fury over President Bush's handling of the war and a leading Democrat's call to bring the troops home." The *Washington Post* reported that Democratic and Republican congressmen "nearly came to blows."

The fury was triggered by a remark from Ohio Republican Representative Jean Schmidt—the most junior member of the House—who declared that one of her constituents, a Marine, had told her "to send Congressman Murtha a message: that cowards cut and run, Marines never do."

The insult to one of the most senior members of the House, a Vietnam veteran, was a violation of the body's customary decorum as well as its rules, which bar members from directly addressing each other.

In response, Rep. Harold Ford of Tennessee and other Democrats shouted and lunged toward the Republican side of the chamber. *Newsweek* commented, "The melee was so intense that it brought the soothing presence of Rep. Tom DeLay from his secure undisclosed location, and Schmidt eventually apologized."

Times quoted two Republican congressmen Thursday claiming that Schmidt made the remark unaware that Murtha was a former Marine. If this is true, it is testament to the abysmal intellectual level of the crop of Republican House members like Schmidt who have been elevated to Congress through appeals to reaction and the backwardness of the Christian right.

Most House observers, however, saw the statement as a deliberate provocation by a Republican congressional leadership that has become increasingly desperate over the plummeting popular support for Bush, the war in Iraq, and the party's domestic political agenda.

In the end, the Republican measure calling for "immediate withdrawal" was voted down by an overwhelming margin, with 403 voting against and just 3 Democrats voting "yes." Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi had urged Democratic congressmen to vote against the measure.

In the wake of the vote, the Bush administration continued its provocative attacks on Democratic critics of the administration's war policy, calling forward military officers to attack its opponents and making threatening statements implying that those opposed to the war were endangering US troops.

The White House knows that Murtha speaks not just for himself, but for significant sections of the Pentagon's uniformed command, with whom he has built up close political ties over decades. Vietnam was the formative experience of many of these senior officers, who once again see the threat of the US military disintegrating under the grinding pressure of a dirty colonial war.

The evidence that the war represents a catastrophic and humiliating failure grows daily. The US death toll in Iraq has reached 2,094, with 67 American soldiers killed in the first 20 days of this month alone. The rate of fatalities is the highest since November 2004.

Meanwhile, damaging corruption scandals involving US officials and politically connected contractors, revelations of torture and death squad murders by US-trained Iraqi security forces, and the American military's own abuse of prisoners and use of banned weapons against the civilian population have all combined to expose the criminal nature of the US war.

It is a measure of the administration's crisis that Bush—eschewing the longstanding convention that partisan politics end at the water's edge—was compelled to interrupt his appearance at the Asian economic summit in South Korea to launch blistering attacks on his domestic critics.

Addressing another captive audience of US military personnel at Osan Air Base Saturday, the US president declared, "In Washington there are some who say that the sacrifice is too great, and they urge us to set a date for withdrawal before we have completed our mission. Those who are in the fight know better."

He then went on to quote approvingly a statement by one of the senior commanders in Iraq, Maj. Gen. William Webster, that setting a deadline for troop withdrawal would be a "recipe for disaster."

The statement itself was an extraordinary breach of the subordination of the military to civilian government and a flouting of the longstanding proscription against US military officers intervening in partisan politics. In citing it, Bush essentially encouraged elements of the military command to come out in defiance of Congress and those who hold elective office.

"General Webster is right," said Bush. "And so long as I am commander in chief, our strategy in Iraq will be driven by the sober judgment of our military commanders on the ground. So we will fight the terrorists in Iraq, and we will stay in the fight until we have achieved the victory our brave troops have fought and bled for."

That the president's constitutional role as commander in chief is meant to assure civilian authority over the military, and bar military commanders from setting government policy, is apparently lost on Bush.

Similarly, the Pentagon staged a teleconference with military commanders in Iraq Friday to counter Murtha's proposal. "I think we have to finish the job that we began here," Army Col. James Brown of the Texas National Guard told the Pentagon press corps. "It's important for the security of this nation, it's important for the security of this region, and certainly it's important in the vital interests of the United States of America."

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, meanwhile, appeared on morning talk shows Sunday to insist there would be no timetable for US troop withdrawals and to issue ominous warnings against continuing the debate on a pullout from Iraq.

"The enemy hears a big debate in the United States, and they have to wonder maybe all we have to do is wait and we'll win.... The battle is here in the United States," he told "Fox News Sunday."

On the ABC News "This Week" program, he charged that calls for pulling out of Iraq could demoralize US troops deployed there. "We have to all have the willingness to have a free debate," he said, "but we also all have to have the willingness to understand what the effect of our words are."

The bitter insults thrown across the aisle in the House chamber and the threat of physical confrontation Friday recalled the acrimony and violence that gripped the halls of Congress in the years leading up to the American Civil War. Then, political tensions erupted in 1856 in a Southern congressman's brutal caning of Senator Charles Sumner in the Senate chamber in retaliation for Sumner's anti-slavery "Crime against Kansas" speech.

But, as Marx famously noted, history repeats itself, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

The Republican-engineered vote was in every sense a political

stunt, much as was Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid's maneuver earlier this month to bring the Senate into secret session so as to force onto the agenda the Bush administration's use of false intelligence on Iraqi weapons.

Both were indications of the deep crisis of Congress and both political parties in the face of massive popular opposition to their policies of war and reaction, which are being pursued by all branches of the US government.

The Republican leadership used the vote to highlight the hypocrisy of Democratic leaders who praised Murtha for challenging the Bush administration's war policy, while distancing themselves from the congressman's demand for withdrawing troops in six months.

House Democratic leader Pelosi denounced the Republicans on the floor of the House and praised Murtha for having "dealt the mighty blow of truth to the President's failed Iraq policy." But when asked if she agreed with his proposal for troop withdrawal, responded, "I think that Mr. Murtha speaks for himself."

Similarly, Reid declared, "I don't support immediate withdrawal." The Democrats' 2004 presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry, said, "I respectfully disagree with John Murtha."

Senator Joseph Biden (Democrat, Delaware) told the Associated Press that it would be a "mistake" to withdraw US troops. He lamented the polls showing massive popular support for precisely that demand. "We're losing the American people, and that is a disaster," Biden said.

Murtha's proposal itself is not a repudiation of US militarism and aggression, but merely a recognition that the present strategy in Iraq has failed, endangering Washington's ability to intervene elsewhere in the world.

Appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday, the Pennsylvania congressman stressed that he was advocating that the Pentagon "redeploy our troops to the periphery." He has called for the US to keep a "quick reaction force" in the region, together with an "over-the-horizon presence of Marines."

Nonetheless, the Democratic leadership opposes even this proposal. The Republicans' decision to call the Democrats' bluff by putting a withdrawal resolution up for a vote imparted an especially acrimonious character to Friday's House debate.

From the outset, using American military power to impose US domination over Iraq and its oil wealth and to secure US hegemony in the strategic Persian Gulf has been a consensus policy shared by both the Democrats and Republicans, whatever their tactical differences over how this policy was to be implemented.

Now, the catastrophic failure of this policy has exposed the vast gulf that separates the two parties—and the financial elite they both represent—from the needs and aspirations of the American working people.



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