

Democrats complicit in Iraq war lies

US Senate's closed session: The short, noisy reign of Harry Reid

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The Democratic leadership's seizure of the Senate's agenda Tuesday by means of an arcane parliamentary rule has underscored the deep political crisis gripping all levels of the government and both major parties.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada) invoked a little-used Senate rule to demand that the body go into a closed session to discuss a stalled investigation on intelligence claims made before the Iraq war. The maneuver sparked an emotional outburst from the Senate's Republican majority leader, Bill Frist. "The United States Senate has been hijacked by the Democratic leadership," he declared, adding that he had been "slapped in the face."

The purpose of this parliamentary coup, according to Reid, was to force the Senate to confront the failure of its Select Committee on Intelligence to issue a report promised 20 months ago. Having conducted a probe on false intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the panel was supposed to complete a second phase of its investigation to determine whether administration officials deliberately "exaggerated or misused" intelligence in order to stampede the country into a war.

Reid motivated his demand on Tuesday for a closed session to discuss the committee's failure to act on the issue with a speech that made not a few telling points about the methods of both the Bush administration and the Congress.

He began by pointing to the indictment last week of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, on perjury charges related to his testimony in the grand jury investigation of the CIA leak. This indictment, he said, "provides a window into what this is really about: how the administration manufactured and manipulated intelligence in order to sell the war in Iraq and attempted to destroy those who dared to challenge its actions."

This is no doubt true. The lies told by Libby to the grand jury were aimed at covering up a conspiracy that involves Bush, Cheney and the entire administration. Having launched a war based upon lies about non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties, the administration set out to punish a critic, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, by publicly identifying his wife—a covert CIA agent—to the media. It is clear from the indictment against Libby that this bit of political thugery was concocted in direct consultation with Cheney and the White House.

That the administration manufactured false intelligence is also well established. It created an "Office of Special Plans" in the Pentagon precisely for that purpose, while Vice President Cheney browbeat CIA analysts in order to suppress ample evidence that the administration's

claims about Iraqi WMD were without foundation.

In his speech on the Senate floor Tuesday, Reid continued by noting, "The decision to place US soldiers in harm's way is the most significant responsibility the Constitution invests in the Congress."

This is also true. However, the formal affirmation of this constitutional power raises troubling questions not only for the Bush administration, but for the Democratic leadership in the Senate as well.

In October 2002, on the eve of the mid-term elections, Harry Reid—then Senate majority whip and one of the more influential members of his party—voted to grant Bush unprecedented powers to wage an unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq at the time of his choosing.

By means of this resolution, the Democratic leadership of the Senate surrendered this "most significant responsibility" to the Bush White House without the least struggle. It based itself on the most cynical—and disastrously shortsighted—political calculations, believing that the party could achieve greater success in congressional races by agreeing not to make the drive to war an issue.

Senator Robert Byrd (Democrat, West Virginia), who has become a political anachronism for opposing the encroachment of presidential power on the constitutional authority of the Senate, stated at the time:

"This is a blank check. Congress is ceding, lock, stock and barrel, its power to declare war—handing it over to a chief executive. Congress might as well just shut the door and put a sign up there that says, 'Going fishing.'"

Reid's name was on that check, along with those of the majority of the Democrats in the Senate, including John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Tom Daschle, Joseph Biden and 23 others.

In his speech Tuesday, Reid said that "a cloud now hangs over this administration," adding, "unfortunately, it must be said that a cloud also hangs over this Republican-controlled Congress for its unwillingness to hold this Republican administration accountable..."

But when the vote was taken to give Bush unfettered power to wage a "war of choice" against Iraq, the Senate was in the hands of the Democrats. How did they hold the administration "accountable?"

Did Reid and other Democratic leaders—who then controlled the Senate Intelligence Committee—press for investigations into the false claims made by Bush, Cheney and then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons and posed a "grave and imminent" danger to the US? Neither Reid nor any other leader of his party contemplated such an investigation then, when the Democrats controlled the Senate Intelligence Committee. On

the contrary, they echoed these claims.

The response of the Republicans and the right-wing media to Reid's charges has been along the lines of: "You can't accuse us, we're all in this together." They have pointed out that leading Senate Democrats warned of a supposed threat from Iraq in the run-up to the war, and that the Clinton administration had made the same charges. His Democratic administration had cited supposed Iraqi weapons as the pretext for cruise missile attacks and bombing campaigns, along with the maintenance of a no-fly zone and economic sanctions that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

The belated expressions of shock and outrage over phony intelligence from the likes of Reid are, to put it mildly, disingenuous. It was well known in Washington that the Bush administration was preparing a war against Iraq from the moment it entered office in 2001, nine months before the September 11 terrorist attacks gave it the pretext it needed for military aggression.

Whatever their tactical differences over how this war was to be prepared, the predominant sections of the American ruling establishment—Democratic and Republican alike—embraced the strategy of invading and occupying Iraq with the aim of seizing control of Iraq's vast oil reserves and establishing US hegemony in a vitally strategic region.

Within the ruling elite, using US military power as a means of asserting the dominance of American capitalism and offsetting its relative decline on the world market was a consensus policy. Among the masses of working people, however, there was intense opposition to war. The lies about weapons of mass destruction were aimed at terrorizing the American people into accepting an invasion.

This was well understood by leaders of both major parties. The war did not come out of the blue, but represented the culmination of a policy of aggression against Iraq that had been escalating over the course of a decade. It no more involved deceiving the leaders of the Senate than it did Bush basing himself on false intelligence.

The war was launched in full confidence that Iraq was essentially defenseless, possessing neither weapons of mass destruction nor a military capable of resisting US "shock and awe." It was, in clear legal terms, a war of aggression—a war crime under the precedents set by the Nuremberg trial of the former leaders of Germany's Third Reich.

In this crime, which has claimed the lives of over 100,000 Iraqi civilians and more than 2,000 US soldiers, the Democratic Senate leaders who supported the war—and still support it—are culpable.

The long delay in the report from the Senate Intelligence Committee is attributable, at least in part, to the complicity of the Democrats in the Iraq war. The Senate Democrats agreed to the Republicans' proposal to postpone until after the presidential election any investigation into the administration's use of phony intelligence to promote the war.

This rotten deal was part and parcel of the Democratic Party's commitment to preventing the election from being turned into a referendum on the most burning political issue facing the American people—the illegal war in Iraq.

After two hours, Tuesday's closed session and Senator Harry Reid's brief reign over the Senate came to an end with another compromise calling for a bipartisan group of Senators to assess the progress of the intelligence committee's investigation.

Then both sides agreed to return to the "people's business"—the enactment of a \$39 billion package of spending cuts together with another \$70 billion in tax cuts directed primarily to the rich, which

will almost certainly pass with Democratic support.

Republicans dismissed the closed-door session as a theatrical "stunt." And, as the *Washington Post* reported, "Democrats did not deny it was a stunt: a brazen effort to change the subject from the Supreme Court confirmation of Sam Alito, which Republicans prefer, to war deaths and Scooter Libby's indictment."

More fundamentally, the Democratic maneuver has the character of a stunt because of the glaring contradiction underlying the Democrats' attacks on the Bush administration over the war in Iraq. They condemn the administration for launching a war based upon lies, but vow to continue the war until "victory," with some like Reid even proposing to increase the number of US occupation troops.

Under conditions where a solid majority of the American people wants the war in Iraq ended, no section of the Democratic leadership is demanding the withdrawal of US troops.

Those looking to the novel parliamentary tactic and verbal pyrotechnics employed by Reid Tuesday afternoon as a sign that the Democratic Party is at last prepared to offer a serious political alternative to the Bush administration are heading for another disappointment.

The struggle to end the war in Iraq and defend democratic rights at home will no more be advanced through the political maneuvers of the Democrats on Capitol Hill than they were in the party's 2004 election campaign. There is every reason to believe that the sham fight of calling the Senate into closed session was aimed at distracting public attention from the almost certain refusal of the Democrats to wage any real fight against the installation of the arch-reactionary Judge Alito onto the Supreme Court.

If the dispute between the Democrats and the Republicans over how the war was prepared has become noisier, it is because the failure of US policy in Iraq has created an acute political crisis for the entire political establishment and both of its parties. US imperialism is beset by intractable contradictions both at home and abroad, fueling mutual recriminations and a deepening institutional crisis.

No democratic resolution can come from within the institutions of the American ruling elite. The working class must build its own mass socialist party to oppose imperialist war and the financial oligarchy in whose interests it is waged.



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