

Senate Democrats back Iraq war, Guantánamo prison camp

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Senate Democrats went on record Tuesday to support the war in Iraq and the continued operation of the US concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay. A large majority of the 44 Senate Democrats lined up with the Republican majority and the Bush administration in key amendments to the defense appropriations bill. The Senate session culminated in a bipartisan 98-0 vote to approve the nearly \$500 billion budget for the Pentagon.

In the two most critical votes, the Democrats gave their support by a 37 to 6 margin to a Republican amendment tacitly supporting the Bush administration's policy on the Iraq war; and then voted 30-13 for a Republican amendment explicitly endorsing the use of military tribunals at Guantánamo Bay.

The first vote came on an amendment by Republican John Warner of Virginia which hailed the US military forces in Iraq and called on the Bush administration to provide regular reports on the "current military mission and the diplomatic, political, economic, and military measures, if any, that are being or have been undertaken to successfully complete or support that mission." The reports were to include figures on Iraqi troop strength and capabilities, and other conditions demonstrating "progress" in the war.

The amendment expressed the wish that the "calendar year 2006 should be a period of significant transition to full Iraqi sovereignty, with Iraqi security forces taking the lead for the security of a free and sovereign Iraq, thereby creating the conditions for the phased redeployment of United States forces from Iraq."

The passage of this measure was portrayed by Democrats and sections of the media as a rebuff to the Bush administration's conduct of the war. It actually represents the watering-down of an already weak amendment offered by Democrat Carl Levin of

Michigan containing the same language about a "successful completion" of the US "mission" in Iraq.

Levin's version appealed to the administration to present a "campaign plan with estimated dates for the phased redeployment of the United States Armed Forces from Iraq." This version—which did not mandate either a definite date or an actual withdrawal—was defeated by a 58-40 vote, largely along party lines.

The Republican leadership then took the Democratic amendment, dropping only the section referring to estimated dates of withdrawal, and presented it as a directive to the Iraqi stooge regime established by the US military occupation. Senator Warner, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, described the amendment as a "strong bipartisan message to the world" that it was time for Iraqis to take charge of their own country.

"The coalition forces, most particularly the United States and Great Britain, have done their job," Warner said. "And now we expect in return that they take charge of their nation and run it and form a democracy and prevent any vestige of a civil war from taking place." Other Republicans expressed the hope that adoption of the amendment would appease growing antiwar sentiment in the US—without altering the actual policy of the US government.

Only six Democrats opposed Warner's amendment, joined by 13 of the most right-wing Republicans. The latter rejected even such a token sop to antiwar opinion.

Levin spoke for the vast majority of Democrats—including Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid as well as Hillary Clinton and other prospective candidates for the party's 2008 presidential nomination—when he said, "I support the Warner amendment as the second-best approach."

A similar pattern—timid, hair-splitting Democratic

opposition followed by capitulation—unfolded on the issue of appeal rights for prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. Last week the Supreme Court, overriding the objections of the White House, agreed to hear the *habeas corpus* appeal of one prisoner, accused of being Osama bin Laden’s personal driver. The Senate adopted an amendment that, if approved by the House, would strip the courts of jurisdiction over such appeals from Guantánamo prisoners and substitute a far more restrictive right of appeal.

The proposal drafted by South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham would deny *habeas corpus* rights to the Guantánamo prisoners and legalize the military tribunals established by the Bush administration. Prisoners would be allowed to appeal their convictions and sentences from the tribunals to the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. They could also appeal a tribunal’s determination that they were, in fact, “enemy combatants,” a category invented by the Bush administration that has no basis in international law. The courts would be required to review only death sentences and prison terms of ten years or more. For other prisoners, such review would not be automatic, but at the discretion of the court.

The Senate first voted down, by 54-42, a Democratic amendment that would have permitted *habeas corpus* appeals but limited them to the DC Court of Appeals. The majority of Democrats then endorsed the Graham amendment, which passed by a vote of 84 to 14.

The Bush administration had decided to back the Graham amendment, dropping its previous insistence that the prisoners could appeal only to the secretary of defense and the president, with the result that all but one Senate Republican supported the measure.

Leaders of the two parties sought to play up their differences over the Iraq war resolution. Majority Leader Bill Frist said of the Democrats, “They want an exit strategy, a cut-and-run exit strategy. What we are for is a successful strategy.” He added that the main purpose of the Republican amendment was to eliminate any suggestion of a timeline that might restrict US military operations in Iraq.

His Democratic counterpart, Minority Leader Harry Reid, sought to portray the amendment as an implied criticism of the White House. He said, “Republicans admitted what Democrats have been saying all along—the administration’s strategy is aimless and

rudderless. If Democrats hadn’t acted, our Republican colleagues would have been fine going along with the administration’s ‘no plan, no end’ approach.”

The defense appropriation bill retains at least three measures opposed by the White House: a prohibition against cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of any prisoner in US custody; a requirement that the White House inform Congress about secret CIA prisons overseas; and a provision to strip security clearances from any federal official who knowingly discloses national security secrets (dubbed the Karl Rove amendment). House Republicans are expected to seek the removal of all three provisions when the bill goes to a conference committee.

The US media presented the decision of Senate Republicans to seek regular progress reports on the war, after more than two years of rubber-stamping White House policy, as a concession to public opposition to the war. Some press reports depicted a virtual congressional insurrection against the war: the *Washington Post* headline, “Senate Rebukes Bush on Iraq War Policy,” was among the most grotesquely distorted.

Such accounts falsify the political reality. Both the Democrats and the Republicans defend the interests of American imperialism and are committed to a US military victory in Iraq. However bitter the conflicts over tactical differences and political advantage, the fundamental unity of the two capitalist parties found expression in the unanimous vote to authorize another half trillion dollars for the Pentagon war machine.

This pro-war unity is coming into increasing conflict with the deep-seated opposition to the war among the American people. Opinion polls, which generally underestimate the unpopularity of the war, now find that 65 percent oppose Bush’s handling of Iraq and 57 percent believe that the war was launched on false pretenses, with the administration misleading the American people about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties between Saddam Hussein and the September 11 terrorist attacks.



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