

American democracy in decay: US Congress debates the Iraq war

Patrick Martin
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The congressional debate last week on the Iraq war combined Republican bullying, Democratic hand-wringing and lies piled upon lies from both sides of the aisle.

Neither the Republicans, who hold a narrow majority in both the House and Senate and generally support the Bush administration's conduct of the war, nor the Democrats, the nominal opposition party, could tell the truth to the American public. Neither side in the debate could admit what the vast majority of the world's politically conscious population, including millions of Americans, already knows: that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq constitute a crime of historic proportions.

Instead, the debate was conducted entirely within the framework of what was best for the foreign policy interests of American imperialism and its corporate ruling class.

Republicans argued that to "stay the course" in Iraq was necessary, no matter what the cost in lives and resources, because the alternative was a historic defeat for the United States and (though they did not say so openly) the collapse of the Bush administration. They claimed that any questioning or criticism of the Bush White House meant giving aid and comfort to the enemy in the "war on terror."

Democrats generally argued that the Bush administration had misled the American people and Congress itself about Saddam Hussein's alleged links to Al Qaeda and his possession of weapons of mass destruction, but not one of these "critics" drew the elementary conclusion that a war based upon lies was necessarily illegitimate.

The Democrats displayed almost as many positions as there were speakers, ranging from open defenders of the Bush administration (Joseph Lieberman in the Senate, 42 Democrats in the House of Representatives), to those who hope to continue the war to victory under Democratic leadership (Senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Biden), to those who believe that it would be less damaging to the long-term foreign policy interests of the US ruling elite to pull out of Iraq, in part or entirely (Senator John Kerry, Representatives Nancy Pelosi and John Murtha).

In both houses of Congress, the debate was rigged by the Republican majority to ensure that there was as little expression of opposition as possible. In the Senate, Republican Majority Whip Mitch McConnell introduced a resolution loosely based on the position of Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate, who last week called for beginning a total pullout no later than December 31 of this year.

As an effort to embarrass the Democrats, the parliamentary maneuver worked perfectly. Only six Democrats—Kerry, Edward Kennedy, Russ Feingold of Wisconsin, Tom Harkin of Iowa, Barbara Boxer of California and Robert Byrd of West Virginia—voted for the resolution, which was defeated by 93-6. Among the vast majority of Democrats who voted against rapid withdrawal were presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton, Biden, Christopher Dodd and Evan Bayh, along with Minority Leader Harry Reid, Minority Whip Richard Durbin, and Lieberman, Bush's favorite Democrat.

This vote followed shortly after a 98-1 vote to approve the most recent emergency appropriations bill for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The two votes combined show that the vast majority of Senate Democrats are hostile to the antiwar views of most Democratic voters. (Polls show as many as 80 percent of self-identified Democrats believe that Bush was wrong to launch the war in Iraq.)

The House discussion was a far more elaborate political event, with 140 representatives taking part in the course of more than 11 hours last Thursday and Friday. While there were the trappings of debate, with speakers alternating for and against, the procedure was a travesty. The House Republican leadership presented a resolution declaring the Iraq war to be an integral part of a global "war on terror" and condemning any effort to set a withdrawal timetable as a surrender to terrorism. No amendments were permitted, nor were the Democrats allowed to present an alternative resolution for a vote.

The language of the resolution, HR 961, parroting White House propaganda, declared the war in Iraq to be "essential to the security of the American people," branded as terrorists all Iraqis fighting against the US occupation, hailed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and congratulated the newly installed stooge regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

After rejecting any deadline for withdrawal, the resolution declared, "the United States is committed to the completion of the mission" in Iraq, and "the United States will prevail in the Global War on Terror, the noble struggle to protect freedom from the terrorist adversary."

The resolution passed with the support of 211 Republicans and 42 Democrats, most of them from districts in the south and rural Midwest. Three Republicans, 149 Democrats and one independent voted against, while five others, three Democrats and two

Republicans, voted “present.”

The debate was largely formulaic, with Republicans on the offensive, proclaiming their devotion to the troops and suggesting that their Democratic opponents were either too cowardly or too squeamish to take the measures necessary for victory in the “war on terror.” Democrats responded defensively, as in the comments of John Murtha: “We support the troops. It’s the policy we don’t support.”

It is one of the longstanding myths of official American politics that “support” for the troops means endorsing policies that lead to their deaths, while those who urge that US soldiers be moved out of harm’s way are slandered as being “against” the troops. If this patriotic baloney were stripped away, the debate would have seen Republicans demanding thousands, even tens of thousands more American deaths in Iraq, with the Democrats arguing that Moloch could perhaps be satisfied with slightly less blood—or more likely, that the blood should be shed elsewhere, perhaps in Iran or North Korea.

Given that a clear majority of the American people oppose the war in Iraq, it might seem absurd that the dominant pro-war party is able to go on the offensive against its congressional critics. But the Democratic Party is also a pro-war party. It represents, however, a faction within the ruling elite, equally committed to the defense of corporate America, which believes that a course correction in Iraq may be necessary to secure US imperialist interests in the Middle East and around the world.

The Republicans are well aware of the duplicity of the Democrats’ half-hearted attempts to distinguish themselves from the war policy of the Bush administration, and eager to exploit the contradiction between the antiwar sentiments of the majority of Democratic voters and the position of the party leadership.

Majority Leader John Boehner and other House Republican leaders were quite open about their determination to force a vote that would alternately be used to attack Democrats as unpatriotic or expose them as hypocrites.

There has been no debate on the Iraq war in either House or Senate for the past three years, since the passage of the resolution in October 2002 authorizing Bush to use force against Iraq. The administration has conducted an open-ended war, financed by emergency appropriations bills and without the slightest congressional oversight—a transparent demonstration of the extent to which democratic procedures have broken down in the United States.

One particularly ominous aspect of the House debate was the distribution of a 74-page Iraq Floor Debate Prep Book to several members of Congress. This document was issued by the Pentagon in an unprecedented effort by the military to intervene in a debate within the legislature. After several Democratic congressmen were e-mailed the document, the Pentagon tried to recall it.

The document regurgitates Bush administration charges against its political opponents, warning, “Iraq will become a haven for terrorists, murderers and thugs,” if the United States leaves “before the job is done.” It brands withdrawal proposals as appeals to “cut and run.”

After one senator complained that the publication of the document violated a legal ban on using government funds for

lobbying Congress, the Pentagon revealed that the document had actually been drafted in the Bush White House, by the National Security Council.

A major aspect of the Republican speeches was to identify Iraq under Saddam Hussein with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the “big lie” that has been a staple of Bush administration war propaganda. Speaker Dennis Hastert set the tone in his speech, declaring, “We in this Congress must show the same steely resolve as those men and women on United Flight 93; the same sense of duty as the first responders who headed up the stairs of the twin towers.”

Perhaps the ugliest contribution came from Charles Norwood, a Georgia Republican, who branded his opponents as cowards. “Many, but not all, on the other side of the aisle lack the will to win,” he said. “The American people need to know precisely who they are. It is time to stand up and vote. Is it Al Qaeda, or is it America?”

Some exchanges brought out the essential strategic agreement between the two parties. Gil Gutknecht, a Minnesota Republican, echoed Margaret Thatcher, saying, “Members, this is not the time to go wobbly. Let’s give victory a chance.” Jane Harman, the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and a leading supporter of the war—who voted against the resolution—responded, “This side is not trying to go wobbly. We’re trying to articulate what we think would be a better strategy for success in Iraq.”

Another pro-war Democrat who voted against the resolution, Ike Skelton of Missouri, bemoaned the damage that the war has done to the capability of the US military. “This nation is at a strategic crossroads,” he said. “We are spending \$9 billion a month and have spent over \$300 billion total on this war. More strikingly, we are losing a battalion’s worth of casualties a month, killed and injured.”

Murtha, one of the main Democratic speakers, said that Al Qaeda and other potential antagonists of the United States, including Iran, North Korea, Russia and China, “want us in Iraq” because the war is “depleting our financial resources and our human resources... If we stay, we’re gonna pay, and we’re gonna pay long term.”

Typical of the mealy-mouthed tone of many Democrats was House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland, who complained, “[I]t is regrettable that this Republican majority seeks to exploit the critical issue of national security for political advantage.... As Majority Leader Boehner explained, its purpose is an opportunity to create ‘a portrait of contrasts between Republicans and Democrats.’ For our country’s sake and for our troops’ sake, the majority should have offered a resolution that sought unity, rather than division.”



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