

US Senate backs indefinite occupation of Iraq

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After a two-day debate, the US Senate voted Thursday to reject two efforts to set limits on the duration of the US occupation of Iraq. An overwhelming bipartisan majority voted by 86-13 to reject a resolution setting a deadline of July 1, 2007 for withdrawal of US troops. Leading Democrats, including Hillary Clinton and Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, lined up with the White House against the measure introduced by John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004.

Then, by a 60-39 vote margin, the Senate rejected a non-binding resolution, introduced by Democrats Carl Levin and Jack Reed, calling on the Bush administration to begin withdrawing some American troops by the end of this year and to announce a timetable for further withdrawals. Six Democrats joined all but one Republican to defeat even this toothless measure.

The Senate vote must be considered in conjunction with two other recent developments. Congressional Republican leaders, prompted by the White House, killed a provision in the emergency war spending bill adopted last week that would have prohibited the use of funds to establish permanent US bases in Iraq. And the Pentagon released its latest schedule for troop rotations into Iraq, indicating that US military forces in the occupied country will remain at or above 130,000 well into 2007.

Only one conclusion can be drawn: the war in Iraq will not be ended through legislative action, which the Democrats, in any case, will not seriously pursue. Both of the official bourgeois parties, the Democrats no less than the Republicans, are committed to an open-ended American military occupation of the oil-rich country.

What was remarkable about the Senate debate was the gulf it revealed between official politics and the sentiments of a large majority of the American people, who deeply oppose both the war and its authors,

George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld & Co. The Republicans took an aggressive posture in the debate, although their position is unpopular with the American public. The Democrats were defensive and half-hearted in their criticisms, in contrast to the strong antiwar sentiment of the vast majority of Democratic voters.

The pattern of the Senate debate was similar to last week's debate in the House of Representatives. Republican after Republican denounced all criticism of the war as an appeal to "cut and run." Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, claiming that "huge progress" was being made in Iraq, declared, "Withdrawal is not an option. Surrender is not a solution."

Senator John McCain denounced both Democratic amendments as calls for "a withdrawal of American troops tied to arbitrary timetables, rather than conditions in-country." Even the Levin-Reed plan, with no mandatory withdrawal, would be "a significant step on the road to disaster," he said. Senator George Allen of Virginia called the Kerry proposal a "tuck-tail-and-run approach."

Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, the Democrats' vice presidential candidate in 2000, opposed both resolutions and sided with the White House.

Senator Hillary Clinton portrayed the Levin-Reed proposal as a middle ground between Bush's open-ended commitment to Iraq and Kerry's proposal "to set a date certain for withdrawal without regard to the consequences." Speaking unabashedly as a representative of US imperialist interests, she called the proposed redeployment of American military forces "a road map for success that will more quickly and effectively take advantage of Iraqi oil revenues."

Reid, Clinton, Joseph Biden, the senior Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, and other pro-war Democrats tried for several days to induce Kerry to

withdraw his resolution for pullout by a specific date, in order to distance the Democratic Party from antiwar sentiments and avoid Republican charges of capitulating to terrorism. Kerry insisted on forcing a vote, but then voted for the Levin-Reed amendment as well.

Opinion polls provide only a pale reflection of mass sentiment in the United States, where the entire weight of the media is employed to suppress and discredit opposition to the war, and hostility to the war and the Bush administration find no outlet within the two-party political system. These conditions make it all the more remarkable that a clear majority of the American people favors the setting of a timetable for withdrawal, and an even larger majority, nearly 60 percent in the recent Pew Research Center study, regards Bush's decision to invade and occupy Iraq as wrong from the start.

In both the Senate and House "debates" the real reasons for the war in Iraq, centered on the country's rich oil reserves, went virtually unmentioned. Early this year, Bush declared that it was illegitimate to raise the role of oil in the decision to invade and occupy Iraq, and he insisted that this issue be excluded from the 2006 election campaign.

The Democratic Party has bowed to this dictate, limiting its criticisms to the multitude of tactical failures by the White House and Pentagon since March 2003, but never raising the most fundamental point, that the war was an act of aggression impelled by economic and geo-strategic aims. It was not a "mistake," as countless Democratic speakers said in the Senate and House debates; it was and is a criminal act carried out in the interests of the American corporate and financial elite.

The debates in both houses of Congress were sought by the Republicans, not the Democrats, and they reflect a White House decision, as spelled out Thursday in the *New York Times*, to make the Iraq war a central issue in the fall election campaign. The purpose, of course, is not to have a genuine national debate about the Iraq war. Instead, the White House seeks to delegitimize opposition to the war and equate it with treasonous capitulation to the terrorists.

There is a profound social and political logic behind this brazen defiance of popular sentiment. It expresses the outlook of a narrow financial oligarchy that controls both political parties and is entrenching itself ever more

firmly atop American society. It has no intention of allowing the views of the people or what it considers democratic shibboleths, such as congressional votes or elections, to stand in the way of its single-minded pursuit of ever-greater personal wealth.

The systematic closing off of every institutional avenue for the expression of popular sentiments and interests shows that the protracted decay of American democracy, made inevitable by the staggering concentration of wealth at the very top of society, is openly assuming the forms of oligarchic rule.

Thus Congress has been preoccupied for weeks with discussions on how best to minimize or abolish the estate tax, a levy which affects less than 0.3 percent of the population—but precisely that layer which exercises near-total influence over politics and the media, and to which a large majority of senators and most congressmen personally belong. Meanwhile, the Republican House leadership quashed an effort to raise the minimum wage from the current derisory level of \$5.15 an hour.

The relative strength of the Republicans, who represent the most right-wing and predatory sections of the US ruling elite, derives from the fact that they have a clear line. The Democrats, on the other hand, are perpetually on their heels and at loose ends because they are based on a political lie: the claim that they, the second party of the financial oligarchy, are the "party of the people." It has become impossible to square this myth with the reality of the class interests which the Democratic Party serves.



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