

# Democrats seek accommodation with Bush administration to continue Iraq occupation

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Over the weekend, leading Democrats pledged their eagerness to work closely with the Bush administration in forging a bipartisan policy to continue the occupation of Iraq, and voiced their support for a substantial increase in the military budget and the recruitment of more Army troops.

The remarks come amidst an intense debate within ruling circles over how to salvage the Iraq occupation and preserve the interests of American imperialism in the Middle East. While several different options are being considered, the possibility of an immediate withdrawal of some or all troops—the position supported by the vast majority of those who voted for Democratic candidates in the elections held less than two weeks ago—has been removed from the table.

Steny Hoyer, the Maryland congressman who was selected by the Democratic caucus to be the new House Majority Leader last week, set the Democratic Party's tone in an interview on "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" on ABC News on Sunday. Stephanopoulos asked Hoyer to respond to the position of Arizona Republican Senator John McCain that more US troops should be sent to Iraq. He also noted that one of the options under consideration by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group is to increase US troop strength to help crush militias operating in Baghdad.

"If that temporary increase is consistent with a plan to transition and to redeploy" US forces, Hoyer said, then he would be prepared to go along with it. Hoyer also repeated the position of many Democrats and sections of the military brass that the main problem with the Bush administration's Iraq policy has been that not enough troops were sent in to begin with.

Hoyer's comments were a clear signal to the Bush administration that the Democrats would support a troop increase if it could be packaged as a step towards an eventual drawdown. To emphasize this point, Hoyer stated toward the end of his interview that US troops were placed in danger not because they are forced to fight in Iraq, but because "their lack of numbers exposes them on a daily basis to danger and death."

The new Majority Leader also made clear that the Democrats would not consider cutting off funding for the Iraq occupation. "We are not going to de-fund the troops in the field, period," he said. The power to cut off spending on a war is the ultimate

power wielded by Congress to compel the executive branch to change its foreign policy. Rejecting that out of hand means that the Bush administration can continue the war in Iraq, as Bush has pledged, until the end of his term in office, January 20, 2009.

These statements highlight the significance of the House Democrats' vote last week for Hoyer over John Murtha, the candidate supported by incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Murtha, who has close ties to sections of the military and for decades stood on the right wing of the Democratic Party caucus in Congress, came to public attention nearly a year ago when he spoke out in the House for an immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

In the run-up to the vote for majority leader last week, Murtha came under attack from the media and fellow Democrats over his involvement in the Abscam bribery scandal over a quarter century ago. Abscam was resurrected as a means to vilify Pelosi and Murtha, but the real issue was Murtha's position on the war.

While Murtha was useful in attracting antiwar support for Democratic congressional candidates on November 7, there is no significant support for the immediate withdrawal position, either in the Democratic caucus or in the American ruling elite as a whole. While issues of policy, regional interests, even personality undoubtedly affected the closed-door secret-ballot vote, the war in Iraq was uppermost. The Democrats decided by an overwhelming 149-86 vote that they did not want to go into the new Congress with a majority leader strongly identified in the public mind with a call for withdrawal.

Hoyer's statement came one day after remarks by the leader of the Senate Democrats, Harry Reid, during the Democrats' weekly radio address. Reid called for a "change of course" and said that he was "encouraged the president is finally listening to outside experts and members of Congress," a reference in particular to the Iraq Study Group. "Working together," Reid said, "we must craft a new way forward—one that allows Iraq to be stabilized, and our troops to begin to come home. On Iraq, and elsewhere, Democrats pray the president will work with us, because we're ready to work with him."

Last week, Reid said that one of his top priorities in the Senate will be to provide an additional \$75 billion in funding

for the military, particularly to rebuild the Army and the Marine Corps, severely depleted by the losses of both manpower and equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan. The invasion and occupation of Iraq has already cost an estimated \$350 billion.

The Democrats are clearly pushing the question of troop withdrawal into the distant future, while the immediate task is “stabilization”—that is, a new bloodbath against organizations hostile to the American presence in Iraq. The US military has long been planning major operations against Shiite militias in Baghdad, particularly that controlled by Moqtada al-Sadr.

Whether or not this will require an increase in US troops in Iraq is one of the major issues currently being debated within the political establishment. Democratic Senator Carl Levin, the incoming chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, spoke out against an increase in troop strength during an interview on CNN’s “Late Edition” on Sunday. However, Levin also made clear that his position—that the US should announce it will begin withdrawing US forces from Iraq in four to six months—is not a call for an end to the occupation.

Levin stressed that he was not advocating a specific timetable for the removing “all or even most of our troops” and said that a substantial US military presence would continue indefinitely. “We do not have a complete withdrawal” in any of our proposals, he said. Levin’s hope is that threatening the Iraqi government with a partial withdrawal will serve to pressure the different factions of the ruling strata in Iraq to reach some accommodation with each other.

One issue about which the different factions of the ruling establishment are generally agreed on is the need for an increase in the size of the US military as a whole, which is seen as a necessary precondition for increasing US forces in Iraq. On Sunday, the *New York Times*’ lead editorial (“The Army We Need”) expressed the view that “the Army’s overall authorized strength needs to be increased some 75,000 to 100,000 more than Mr. Rumsfeld had in mind for the next several years.” The *Times* is here expressing the position of leading Democrats, who have long pushed for increasing the number of soldiers in the Army and Marine Corps.

In testimony before the Armed Services Committee last week, General John Abizaid, the top US commander for the Middle East, ruled out troop reductions but said that increasing the size of the US presence was infeasible, given the existing strains on the military. The timing of this testimony was very significant, coming shortly after the election, as it was intended to shift discussion away from any talk of withdrawing US forces.

Lurking in the background of the debate over increasing the size of the military is the question of the draft. Democrat Charles Rangel, the incoming Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, reiterated on CBS’s “Face the Nation” his support for the implementation of the draft. “If we are going to challenge Iran and challenge North Korea, and some people have called for more troops in Iraq,” he said, “we can’t do

that” without the draft. “I don’t see how anyone can support the war and not support the draft.”

Rangel pledged that he would reintroduce a bill to initiate the draft, a proposal that has been supported by many Democratic strategists, as one of his first acts in the new session of Congress next year.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, speaking after Rangel, said that he also supports an increase in the size of the military, but that he felt that this could be done with an all-volunteer force. If this is not possible, however, Graham said, “We’ll look for some other option.”

In the debates over how to salvage the occupation, the Democrats are largely lining up behind the Iraq Study Group, set up by some congressional Republicans to propose a new US strategy in Iraq. Prominently represented within this group are former members of the first Bush and Clinton administrations, who have certain tactical differences with the present Bush administration and figures such as Vice President Cheney and outgoing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Leading Democrats, including Reid, have also already declared their full support for Bush’s new nomination for defense secretary, Robert Gates. Gates was a longtime CIA operative under President Reagan and served as CIA director under Bush senior. He played a major role in the Iran-Contra scandal, and was also involved in American support for Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, during the proxy war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Reid said on Friday that Gates should be confirmed easily within the next few weeks.

The statements of Democrats in recent days highlight the central fact that there is no section of the political establishment opposed to the war, even though this is the position of the majority of the American people. On the contrary, in the aftermath of the election, the Democrats are seeking to forge a new pro-war consensus to defend the interests of the American ruling elite. As the population of the US is moving to the left, the ruling elite is responding by moving sharply to the right.



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