

The 2006 elections and the US two-party system

Bush, Democrats disenfranchise antiwar voters

The editorial board
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Four weeks after the November 7 US congressional elections, all sections of the American ruling elite have turned their back on the massive antiwar vote that repudiated the policies of the Bush administration, put an end to Republican control of both the House of Representatives and Senate and placed the Democratic Party in control of Congress.

In the days immediately following the vote, exit polls documented the critical role of antiwar sentiment in determining the outcome. Two thirds of those voting were opposed to the Bush administration's conduct of the war in Iraq, and of these, 80 percent voted for Democratic candidates. The war was by far the most important issue in the minds of those who turned out to vote.

Post-election commentary from media pundits and officials of both big parties agreed that the elections had become a de-facto referendum on the war, and that the American people had delivered a resounding "No." The exit polls showed that among the antiwar majority, the most popular policy option was an immediate, rapid and complete withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

Yet less than a month later, the Bush administration, the incoming congressional Democratic leadership and media analysts agree that any discussion of immediate withdrawal from Iraq is off limits. Instead, the official debate over Iraq policy is tightly circumscribed, with options ranging from sending tens of thousands of additional troops to a partial pullback of US forces from frontline combat to a half dozen bases in or near Iraq, to remain in place for years, if not decades.

The two leading US daily newspapers both took note in recent days of this rapid rejection of any consideration in official circles of pulling out of Iraq. The *New York Times* carried a front-page analysis December 1, written by its well-connected political reporter, David Sanger, headlined, "Idea of Rapid Withdrawal From Iraq Seems to Fade."

Sanger wrote, "In the cacophony of competing plans about how to deal with Iraq, one reality now appears clear: despite the Democrats' victory this month in an election viewed as a referendum on the war, the idea of a rapid American troop withdrawal is fast receding as a viable option." He noted the unanimity on this question from Bush, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, the congressional Democrats and former president Bill Clinton.

The *Washington Post* followed suit the next day with an article headlined, "Officials Expect No Big Changes, No Matter What Panel Advises," reporting that "the Bush administration has notified allies that it will not budge on certain aspects of Iraq policy," regardless of

the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group or the findings of administration reviews of Iraq policy, conducted by the Pentagon and the National Security Council.

The Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan commission established by Congress, will report its findings this Wednesday, December 6, but reports leaked to the press in advance indicate that withdrawal from Iraq is not one of the options it is considering. Press accounts quoting unnamed members of panel, which consists of five Republicans and five Democrats, said that the recommendations would be limited to a redeployment of troops within Iraq and an increased diplomatic effort, including talks with Syria or Iran.

Bush, as usual, expressed the consensus opposition to withdrawal in the crudest and most arrogant fashion. Commenting to journalists during his trip to Latvia and then Jordan last week, he sputtered, "This business about graceful exit just simply has no realism to it whatsoever." It would have been appropriate to respond by asking about the "realism" of Bush's own claims about Iraq, from weapons of mass destruction to an Iraqi connection to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to "democratization," but no one of the attendant press corps did so.

Instead, the *Washington Post* applauded Bush's unabashed repudiation of the clear verdict of the US electorate, editorializing on December 3, "Mr. Bush, who commonly is accused of being out of touch with reality, made on statement last week that struck us a pretty rational: 'This business about a graceful exit,' the president said, 'simply has no realism to it at all.'"

While withdrawal of US troops is taken off the table, official Washington is increasingly preoccupied with a debate over what methods should be employed to salvage something for American imperialism from the debacle in Iraq, and with conflicts within the political establishment and within the Bush administration itself over who is to take the fall for the strategic disaster.

This is not a matter of genuinely assessing responsibility for the colossal loss of life, American and Iraqi, and the criminal destruction of the social fabric of an entire country. It is rather a matter of settling scores within the ruling elite by removing individual policy makers (like Rumsfeld), gaining political advantage for one or another section of the two official parties in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election and prosecuting an increasingly bitter struggle within the vast military-intelligence bureaucracy.

This last dimension of the conflict has resulted in a war of leaks, with officials at the Pentagon, White House, CIA and State Department releasing classified internal assessments. In the past week alone, the secret documents supplied to the *Times* and the *Post*

included the following: a highly critical White House assessment of the US-installed Maliki government, written by National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley; a Marine Corps study of Anbar Province concluding that there was no possibility of US military victory there; a State Department proposal to back the Shiite side in Iraq's civil war, abandoning the pretense of democracy and mediation between the factions; and most recently, the memo from Pentagon chief Rumsfeld to Bush, dated November 6, the day before the election, suggesting possible alternative tactics for the US occupation regime.

The Rumsfeld memo is remarkable for two elements: the open admission of failure of existing US policies in Iraq, and the absence of any explanation for that failure. It reveals both the devastating crisis of the US occupation, as well as the political and intellectual bankruptcy of the principal authors of this illegal war.

In appearances on national television interview programs Sunday morning, National Security Adviser Hadley sought to explain away the significance of the Rumsfeld memo, denying the obvious fact that the memo flatly contradicted the Bush administration's propaganda throughout the fall election campaign about steady progress and "success" in Iraq.

The Senate Democrats and Republicans who followed Hadley on the interview programs were in general agreement with the White House on the most fundamental issue—that a US defeat in Iraq would be a disaster with immense international repercussions, one which must be prevented at all costs. Within that framework, they offered a variety of recommendations to forestall defeat or salvage as much as possible from the Bush administration's failure.

On several programs it would have been difficult to determine from their comments on Iraq which senator represented which party. Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, appearing on the CBS program "Face the Nation," was far more hawkish than his Republican counterpart, Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, who has publicly declared the Bush administration's policy a failure.

On "Fox News Sunday," Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a close ally of Senator John McCain, called for an intensification of US military operations in Iraq, with thousands of additional troops, and warned that a US defeat in Iraq would have a shattering impact across the Middle East, including on Israel.

He rejected the proposition that Bush should find common ground with opponents of the war in Iraq, declaring, "[W]e've got to win in Iraq. And any strategy that unites the country and we lose I'm against. I'd rather be divided as a nation and win than united and lose."

The Democrat who appeared with Graham, Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, responded to this outburst—which all but placed opponents of the war in the same category as Al Qaeda terrorists—with the placating comment, "Well, look, I think that Lindsey makes a lot of good points, but the bottom line here is none of this is going to be doable unless there's a political settlement within Iraq."

Biden went on to boast that he had called two years ago for sending 100,000 additional troops to Iraq, only to have it rejected by the Bush administration as impractical and unnecessary. He reiterated his call for steps towards a partition of Iraq into three separate states, Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish.

The most politically illuminating interview Sunday was on NBC's "Meet the Press," with Republican Senator John Warner and Democrat Carl Levin, respectively the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who will exchange positions in January when the Democrats take control of Congress.

Warner, a leading congressional voice of the national security

apparatus, and particularly the military brass—he is a former secretary of the Navy—emphasized the necessity for the Bush administration to reach an agreement on the war with the incoming Democratic majority in Congress.

"After all," he said, "the people spoke in this election, very loudly, and the new leadership are a reflection of the voices of the people across this country." He added, "Our Constitution set up the executive branch, the Congress, but the people have the power in this country. They spoke." Warner returned the point again, concluding, "We have an obligation to the people of this country, who spoke in this election. And we better darn well pay attention to what they're saying."

In other circumstances, these comments would be unremarkable, a mere restatement of constitutional and democratic truisms. But in the context of the current crisis in Iraq and Washington, the Republican senator was warning the administration that it needs to enlist the Democratic Party in the House and Senate in its war effort. His argument amounts to this: because the voters expressed antiwar sentiments in voting for the Democrats, Bush needs to make a deal with the Democrats to continue or expand the war.

That the Democrats are ready for such a deal was confirmed by Levin, who appeared side-by-side with Warner and expressed strong agreement. Levin also indicated that Bush's nominee for secretary of defense, former CIA Director Robert Gates, would receive quick hearings and approval. The Democrats will not use their control of Congress either to cut off funding for the war or block the appointment of officials committed to continuing it.

The Iraq Study Group is not the only bipartisan conspiracy to continue the war in Iraq. Its operations are only a specific demonstration of a larger process: the collaboration of the two big business parties to disenfranchise American people and continue, more or less indefinitely, a bloody and predatory war that the majority has rejected.

The month since the November 7 election is an experience from which vital political lessons must be drawn. It is impossible to carry out a struggle against the Iraq war within the framework of the existing two-party system. The only way to fight the Bush administration's program of reaction and war is to break with the Democrats and Republicans and build a new mass political party of the working class, opposed to the corporate oligarchy and the profit system as a whole.



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