

As US prepares to escalate war in Iraq

Bush seeks bipartisan backing from Democratic Congress

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President George W. Bush appeared with his Cabinet Wednesday in the White House Rose Garden to make an appeal for bipartisan collaboration between the administration and the incoming Democratic-led Congress. He called upon Democrats to join him in pursuing an agenda that includes an escalation of the US war in Iraq, intensified political repression and a continuation of social and fiscal policies aimed at transferring wealth from the broad mass of working people to America's financial oligarchy.

The brief remarks came on the eve of the 110th Congress's opening session Thursday and expressed the White House's determination to continue its reactionary policies, both foreign and domestic, despite their overwhelming defeat at the polls in November's midterm elections—and its confidence that it will be able to do so.

"The Congress has changed; our obligations to the country haven't changed," said Bush.

His speech begged the question that dominated the November elections and continues to overshadow all aspects of American political life—the debacle confronting the US in Iraq.

Bush spoke for little more than five minutes before turning on his heels and marching back to the White House without taking any questions from the assembled media. He commented on the Iraq war only indirectly when he discussed his plan to submit a five-year budget proposal next month. He said that this document would include provisions to address "the need to protect ourselves from radicals and terrorists, the need to win the war on terror, the need to maintain a strong national defense, and the need to keep this economy growing by making tax relief permanent."

In addition to demanding that his tax cuts for the rich be made permanent, Bush called for "spending restraint" and the "reform" of entitlement programs, including Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, which he suggested were on the verge of "bankrupting our country."

His brief remarks closely tracked an opinion piece

published under his byline in Wednesday's *Wall Street Journal*, headlined "What Congress Can Do for America."

As examples of the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together, this column cited passage of the repressive USA Patriot Act and the misnamed No Child Left Behind legislation. It dealt more explicitly with the Iraq war—which Bush could have also invoked as an example of bipartisan collaboration.

Bush wrote, "If democracy fails and the extremists prevail in Iraq, America's enemies will be stronger, more lethal, and emboldened by our defeat. Leaders in both parties understand the stakes in this struggle. We now have the opportunity to build a bipartisan consensus to fight and win the war."

What Bush has in mind is to be revealed to the American people in a speech reportedly scheduled next week. Numerous press reports based on interviews with administration officials, however, leave no room for doubt that in the face of mass popular opposition to the war, the Bush White House intends to escalate the violence.

The *New York Times* reported Tuesday that Bush "seems all but certain not only to reverse the strategy" of reducing the US military presence in Iraq, but also to speed up the replacement of the top military commander in the country, Gen. George Casey, who had championed this strategy.

According to administration officials interviewed by the *Times*, Bush had grown "concerned that General Casey, among others, had become more fixated on withdrawal than victory."

"Whatever form the new strategy takes, it seems almost certain to include a 'surge' in forces, something that General Casey insisted earlier this year he did not need and which might even be counterproductive," the *Times* reported.

Similarly, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday, "For the Bush administration, deploying tens of thousands of additional troops to Iraq may not be as tough a call as

deciding when to bring them home.

“White House officials say a troop ‘surge’ almost certainly will be the centerpiece of Mr. Bush’s new strategy for Iraq to be unveiled mid-month. But while administration officials have gone to great lengths to emphasize that the extra troops will be in Iraq only temporarily, there is no clear definition of how long that might be.”

The *Journal* article indicates that the plans for an escalation involve leaving the newly deployed troops in Iraq for a year to 18 months, or even indefinitely. “Mr. Bush has staked his presidency on Iraq, and several White House aides say they believe he would be inclined to leave the extra troops there until improvement is evident,” the paper reports. “Senior commanders, by contrast, have expressed concern that leaving extra troops too long risks lasting damage to the US armed forces.”

BBC News reported that the “central theme” in Bush’s impending war speech will be “sacrifice.” The British news network added, “The speech, the BBC has been told, involves increasing troop numbers.”

Less than two months after an election in which the American people went to the polls to express their opposition to the war in Iraq and their demand for US troops to be withdrawn, plans are well advanced for a major escalation of the killing that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and over 3,000 American troops.

In the face of this catastrophe, the political calculations guiding the preparations of the Democratic leadership to assume control of both houses of Congress are so transparently cowardly and cynical as to assume the character of farce.

The Democratic farce will take the form of a “100-hour” legislative charade aimed at scoring a propaganda victory in advance of Bush’s State of the Union address. The package of bills includes some token reform measures, few of which will clear the Senate any time soon without significant alteration, or for that matter survive a presidential veto.

Among them is a proposal to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 over two years—a measure that does not even compensate for inflation’s erosion of real income over the ten year period since the last increase, and which is expected to be joined with yet another tax break for business. Also contemplated are measures lowering interest rates on student loans and funding stem cell research, as well as a slight rollback of subsidies for big oil and as another round of cosmetic congressional ethics reforms.

The Democratic agenda also includes the implementation of all of the “homeland security” proposals of the 9/11 Commission, including a raft of measures that further threaten civil liberties and increase the police powers of the

state. Its centerpiece on economic policy is a return to the “pay-as-you-go” budget rules that prevailed during the Clinton administration—a formula for fiscal austerity and further cuts in social spending. At the same time, the Democrats have foresworn any effort to roll back the tax windfalls for the rich passed under Bush.

The “100 hours” of incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is presumably meant to invoke the famous “100 days” that inaugurated Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first term. But any comparison between the two only underscores the steady drive to the right by the Democratic Party over the intervening seven decades and the bankruptcy of its current reformist pretensions.

Meanwhile, the Democratic leadership is preparing to vote next month for another \$100 billion “emergency” appropriation to continue the war in Iraq, even as Bush sets in motion plans to escalate the bloodbath. No legislative initiatives are proposed in the first 100 hours, or the first 100 weeks for that matter, to bring the troops home, or to repeal the reactionary legislation that Democrats helped pass under Republican congressional leadership, such as the USA Patriot Act or the Military Tribunals Act.

Bush has made it clear that he feels in no way compelled to alter his policies in Iraq or at home in the face of their mass repudiation at the polls. And the Democrats have no intention of fighting on the basis of the popular anti-war mandate that brought them control of Capitol Hill.

What is certain is that the slaughter in Iraq will intensify in the coming weeks and months. An inevitable corollary of an escalation of this war will be an intensification of political repression at home against the mass opposition that it will provoke.

The opening of the 110th Congress and the ascension of the Democrats in the House and Senate only underscores the basic reality that it is impossible to wage a successful struggle against war and in defense of democratic rights within the existing political institutions and the two-party monopoly exercised by the corporate and financial interests that control America.



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