

Democrats criticize Iraq “surge”, but won’t cut war funds

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The two top congressional Democratic leaders have publicly opposed the Bush administration’s plans to dispatch more troops to Iraq, while signaling to the White House that there will be no serious effort to prevent an escalation of the slaughter as the bloodbath in Iraq heads towards its fifth year.

The two-faced character of the Democratic posture is the product of their need to speak to two audiences at the same time: the American voters, largely working class and middle class, who voted for Democratic candidates last November 7 to express their opposition to the war; and the American ruling elite, whose social and economic interests, within the US and worldwide, the Democratic Party is committed to defend.

Public opinion is overwhelmingly against Bush’s plan for a “surge” of additional military forces into Iraq. One recent poll showed only 11 percent favoring the deployment of more troops, while over 50 percent supported withdrawal of all US forces by the end of 2007. A second poll found that even when the alternatives were heavily loaded in favor of the escalation, with those polled asked to assume that the increase in troops would stabilize Iraq, more were opposed than in favor.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi sought to appease this massive antiwar sentiment with a letter to Bush that was made public January 5, followed up by Reid giving the Democratic Party’s response Saturday to Bush’s weekly radio address, and Pelosi appearing Sunday on the CBS interview program “Face the Nation.”

The letter offered Bush the cooperation of the Democratic Congress in “finding an end to the war in Iraq,” citing the death toll among American troops, now past the 3,000 mark, and called for a decision “to begin the phased redeployment of our forces in the next four to six months.”

“Our troops and the American people have already sacrificed a great deal for the future of Iraq,” they write. “After nearly four years of combat, tens of thousands of U.S. casualties, and over \$300 billion dollars, it is time to bring the war to a close. We, therefore, strongly encourage you to reject any plans that call for our getting our troops any deeper into Iraq.”

The Democratic letter does not challenge the basis of the war and expresses the wish to contribute to the “success” of the Bush military intervention. Not only that, the Democrats attribute this position to the American people as well,

portraying the election results as the product of the public belief that the Iraq intervention has failed to achieve Bush’s war aims, not to popular opposition to the war itself.

“The American people demonstrated in the November elections that they do not believe your current Iraq policy will lead to success,” Reid and Pelosi write. This effectively accepts the argument put forward by the White House and its neo-conservative backers that the public will support a victorious war, regardless of the casualties, and that administration policy should therefore be based on achieving military victory.

The Democrats’ differences with Bush revolve around whether military victory is achievable, not about the legitimacy of Bush’s initial decision to invade and occupy Iraq, which the congressional Democratic leadership largely supported, and which nearly every Democrat in Congress has backed materially by voting to fund the military budget.

The cringing character of the letter is underscored by its language—it closes with Reid and Pelosi pleading, “We appreciate you taking these views into consideration”—and by its timing—only a few days before Bush goes on national television to announce an escalation plan that was largely worked out before the Democratic Party missive was issued.

The initial inclination of the incoming Democratic congressional leadership was to focus on a handful of cosmetic measures on domestic policy—tightening ethics rules, a minimum wage increase, minuscule improvements in the Medicare drug plan and college student loan subsidies—and avoid as long as possible any public engagement with the White House over the war.

One top House Democrat, Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, told the *Washington Post*, “I know where support for more troops is, and I know where support is for the minimum-wage increase. I’d rather be doing what we’re doing.”

The downplaying of the war issue was flatly in defiance of public opinion. A CBS poll published January 4 found that 45 percent of voters want the Congress to focus on Iraq, compared to only 7 percent regarding the economy as the first priority, 7 percent for health care, and 6 percent for immigration.

This decision was essentially a reprise of the political strategy carried out by the Democratic leadership in the 2002 congressional elections, when they sought to confine campaign

discussion to domestic issues and avoid the overriding question of the war, even though the Bush administration was seeking a vote on a resolution to authorize military action, which passed the House and Senate only days before the election.

The congressional Democrats were only compelled to address the war issue by political necessity, when it became clear that Bush would give a national television speech this week announcing a decision to send more troops to Iraq. According to the Post, Pelosi summoned a meeting of chairman of the committees with relevant jurisdiction—Armed Services, Foreign Affairs, Intelligence, Homeland Security, and Oversight and Government Reform—and the decision was taken to move scheduled hearings up from the end of January to begin on Thursday, the day after Bush’s speech.

The hearings themselves will be narrowly focused. There will be no examination of the lies employed by the Bush administration, about weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda, to intimidate public opinion in the run-up to the war. As Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden said, “Our purpose is not to revisit the past, but to help build a consensus behind a new course for America in Iraq.”

Reid’s radio speech Saturday and Pelosi’s Sunday appearance on “Face the Nation” were further demonstrations of the half-hearted and fundamentally dishonest character of the Democratic Party “opposition” to the war.

Reid cited the opposition in the Pentagon to the proposed “surge” in troops into Baghdad. “Based on the advice of current and former military leaders, we believe this tactic would be a serious mistake,” he said in his reply to Bush.

Pelosi repeatedly declared in her television interview that the Democrats would not cut off funding for the war, portraying that as an action that would endanger the American troops now deployed in Iraq—covering up the reality that the greatest danger to the lives of American soldiers is the right-wing cabal in the White House, which ordered them to Iraq in the first place.

She suggested, tentatively and timidly, that a White House request for additional funds to expand the war would “receive the harshest scrutiny,” although this language itself suggested hearings and the raising of questions, not an actual denial of the funding.

As in the letter, Pelosi reiterated that the outgoing US commanders in Iraq were opposed to additional troop deployment, since it would only further inflame the nationalist opposition to the US occupation and provide more targets for bombs, mortars and sniper fire—particularly if coupled with more aggressive street-level patrols in which the US troops leave their armored vehicles.

Even this level of opposition was too much for other prominent Democrats, including two potential presidential candidates. Biden, an announced presidential candidate, declared on a Sunday television interview program that it would be unconstitutional for Congress to limit troop levels or

cut funding for an escalation of the war, since Congress had authorized the war in the first place. He said the surge plan was “a tragic mistake,” but added that “as a practical matter, there is no way to say, ‘Mr. President, stop.’”

Senator Barack Obama of Illinois told *Newsweek* magazine in an interview last week that Bush would likely have at least a further year of untrammelled control over the war. “To anticipate your question,” he told the magazine, “is Congress going to be willing to exercise its control over the purse strings to affect White House policy? I am doubtful that that is something we are willing to do in the first year.”

In other words, the congressional Democrats will permit the war to continue until the election year, when they will adopt a (purely verbal) antiwar posture in the congressional and presidential campaign. *Newsweek* observed, “[d]on’t expect Obama—or most other Dems—to try to block George W. Bush when he asks Congress in the coming weeks for another billion-dollar bundle for the war. The party won’t deny the funds, and may not even try to attach conditions to them.”

The Democrats are prepared to back an even wider use of military power. The new House Majority Leader, Steny Hoyer of Maryland, gave an interview to the *Jerusalem Post*, published Sunday, in which he called for stepped up diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions against Iran, while not rejecting military action. “I have not ruled that out,” he said, in response to a question about possible air strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities. “It is not an option we want to consider until we know there is no other option.”



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