

On the eve of State of the Union speech

US political crisis mounts over Iraq war escalation

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The Bush administration is pushing ahead with its plans to intensify the war in Iraq despite daily evidence of the overwhelming opposition to this escalation on the part of the American people. A new opinion poll released Monday, the day before Bush's State of the Union Speech, showed two-thirds of the public against the Iraq war, with more than 60 percent opposing Bush's decision to send additional US troops into combat.

The poll, jointly commissioned by the *Washington Post* and ABC News, found that popular hostility to Bush and the policies of his administration had reached an all-time high. Only 29 percent supported his handling of the war in Iraq, compared to 70 percent opposed. Only 33 percent approved of Bush's overall record, with 65 percent disapproving. An absolute majority, 51 percent, "strongly disapproved" of Bush's record, while only 17 percent "strongly approved."

The poll was conducted during the week following Bush's January 10 nationally televised speech announcing the decision to increase US troop strength in Iraq by 21,500. Opposition to the plan increased after Bush's speech, from 61 percent to 65 percent.

Nearly two thirds said the initial decision to invade Iraq was wrong, 52 percent said US troops should be withdrawn whether or not the professed goal of "restoring civil order" is achieved, and 59 percent said that Congress should block Bush's plan to send more troops.

The *Post*-ABC poll only confirms the findings of other polls released during the past two weeks, which have demonstrated that the vast majority of the American people want a rapid end to the war in Iraq, and confirmed that the war was the leading issue both now and in the congressional elections last November. The *Post* poll found that 47 percent said the Iraq war was the most important political issue, with no other subject (the economy, health care, education, terrorism, ethics) reaching double digits.

While public opinion has become implacably opposed to a continuation of the war, the Bush White House is proceeding not merely to continue, but to expand it, dispatching additional troops to Iraq, positioning additional air and naval forces in the

Persian Gulf, and openly threatening to extend the conflict to Iran and Syria in an increasingly desperate bid to salvage military victory out of the debacle.

The principal enabler of the Bush administration's military adventurism is the congressional Democratic leadership, which claims to oppose the escalation of the war in Iraq but has renounced the two constitutional methods for forcing the executive branch to halt the bloodbath: cutting off funds for the war or impeaching and removing Bush from office.

The Democrats seek to balance between the mass opposition to the war—which produced their electoral victory last November—and the policies of an administration whose basic aims and goals in the Middle East they share. This two-faced approach was expressed most recently in the remarks delivered by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to the National Press Club January 19.

With new House Speaker Nancy Pelosi at his side, Reid gave what was billed as an advance rebuttal to the State of the Union speech Bush will deliver on January 23, focusing on the "critical challenges around the world America must confront."

He reiterated the standard Democratic Party criticism that the war in Iraq has become a diversion from confronting more urgent crises in Afghanistan, Iran and North Korea, while adding to this list Sudan and Latin America, where, Reid warned, "Chavez and Castro want to put their leftist mark on young democracies."

He complained, "[W]e have yet to adequately confront these or other problems, because this administration has been all consumed and, frankly, overwhelmed by its own failed policies in Iraq." The war in Iraq has now lasted longer than World War II, he noted, without achieving the goals set by the White House.

Citing criticism by military generals, including "our top commanders in the region, Generals Abizaid and Casey," as well as the "bipartisan Iraq Study Group," Reid called for shifting the tactics of the American forces in Iraq and pulling them back from the growing civil war.

The purpose of such a withdrawal would not be to achieve "peace," he made clear, but rather to wage war in other places.

“A phased redeployment will allow our country to rebuild the military force here at home and increase the number of troops available to hunt for Osama bin Laden and stabilize Afghanistan.” Reid said.

While acknowledging that the majority of Americans voted in favor of a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq when they went to the polls last November, Reid called for no legislative action outside of a non-binding sense-of-Congress resolution opposing the Bush escalation plan. “With that vote,” he continued, “our hope—our prayer—is that this President will finally listen.”

If Bush did not listen, Reid made clear, Congress would do nothing to block him. “This Congress,” he declared, “will always put the needs of our troops first.” In other words, there will be no congressional action to cut off funds for the war in Iraq, action that would not endanger a single soldier, but would rather compel the White House to withdraw troops—or defy the law and provoke a constitutional crisis.

Voicing the concerns of much of the military and foreign policy establishment, Reid made a specific warning against a sudden American military attack against Iran. “I’d like to be clear,” he said. “The President does not have the authority to launch military action in Iran without first seeking Congressional authorization—the current use of force resolution for Iraq does not give him such authorization.”

Reid concluded by recalling the bipartisan unity of leading Democrats and Republicans behind Bush in the weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, including the near-unanimous congressional support for the invasion of Afghanistan. “Together this year, we must reclaim that bipartisan spirit,” he urged the White House.

Two bipartisan resolutions of disapproval have been introduced in the Senate. The first, co-sponsored by Democrats Joseph Biden of Delaware and Carl Levin of Michigan, the chairmen of the foreign relations and armed services committees, and Republicans Chuck Hagel of Nebraska and Olympia Snowe of Maine, opposes the sending of additional troops and calls for reducing rather than intensifying the US commitment in Iraq, without making any mention of actual withdrawal.

A second resolution, even more toothless, was introduced Monday by three Republican senators—John Warner of Virginia, the ranking Republican on the armed services committee, Susan Collins of Maine and Norm Coleman of Minnesota—and backed by Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska. It substitutes the word “augmentation” for “escalation,” and tones down the rhetorical criticism of the Bush administration, while still expressing opposition to the increase in troops.

This resolution is notable mainly for spotlighting the dwindling support among Senate Republicans for Bush’s Iraq policies. According to one senator who spoke with CBS Washington Bureau chief Bob Schieffer last week, only three of the 100 members of the Senate clearly support the policy outlined by Bush on January 10—Republicans John McCain of

Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, and Democrat Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut.

Lieberman has gone so far as to urge the White House to defy any congressional cutoff of funds for the war. In an interview January 14 on the NBC News program “Meet the Press,” Lieberman was asked whether Bush should abide by a cutoff of funds for the escalation of the war, proposed by Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. He responded, “obviously, that’s up to the president. I hope he wouldn’t abide by it.”

The entire official debate in Washington takes place within a framework of accepting the legitimacy of the US invasion and occupation and the claims of the Bush administration—after the collapse of its earlier lies about weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi-Al Qaeda ties—that its sole purpose in conquering Iraq was to overthrow the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and “liberate” the Iraqi people.

Neither the big business politicians nor the media pundits acknowledge that the central goal of the invasion was to establish US control over Iraq’s vast oil resources and to gain a strategic military position from which to dominate the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East.

These real, material imperialist interests are referred to only obliquely, and relatively rarely, as in an article January 20 in the *New York Times* reporting that a cabinet-level committee in Baghdad had drafted a new law governing the distribution of revenues from Iraq’s oilfields.

The article noted, as though it was an incidental and unimportant fact, that the law “would also radically restructure parts of Iraq’s state-controlled oil industry by giving wide independence—possibly leading to eventual privatization—to the government companies that control oil exports, the maintenance of pipelines and the operation of oil platforms in the Persian Gulf.”

Such a move, opening the road for US and British oil companies to recapture the position in Iraq which they enjoyed more than 40 years ago and reap vast profits at the expense of the Iraqi people, is one of the principal motivations for the US invasion and the continued occupation and military devastation of the country.



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