

# Iraq escalation heightens political crisis in Washington

Barry Grey in Washington DC  
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Congressional hearings on President Bush's plan to escalate the war in Iraq revealed broad opposition from both Democrats and prominent Republicans.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice testified Thursday before the foreign relations committees in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Peter Pace testified before the House Armed Services Committee Thursday and the Senate Armed Services Committee on Friday.

Rice's appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was particularly contentious. It highlighted the concerns among legislators on both sides of the aisle that Bush's decision to send more than 21,000 US troops to Iraq, announced in a televised speech Wednesday, is a prelude to stepped-up provocations against Syria and Iran, leading to military action against one or both countries.

The issue was directly posed by Senator Joseph Biden, the Democratic chairman of the committee, both in his opening remarks and in his questioning of Rice. Biden declared that the American people had hoped to hear a plan that would "start to bring our troops home," but instead "they heard a plan to escalate the war—not only in Iraq, but possibly into Iran and Syria as well." He continued, "The president's strategy is not a solution, it is a tragic mistake."

Following Rice's opening statement, Biden began his questioning by stating: "Last night the president said, and I quote, 'We will interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. We will seek out and destroy networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.' Does that not mean the president has plans to cross the Syrian and/or Iranian borders to pursue those persons or individuals or governments providing that help?"

Rice's answer was deliberately ambiguous. She said, "We are trying to protect our forces and we are doing that by seeking out these networks that we know are operating in Iraq... We are able, as we did on the 21st of December [when US forces seized two Iranian officials in Baghdad] to go after these groups where we find them... What is really being contemplated here in terms of these networks is that we believe we can do what we need to do inside Iraq. Obviously the president isn't going to rule anything out to protect our troops..."

Biden then asked Rice if she believed Bush "has the constitutional authority to cross the border into Iran or Syria to take out the networks in those countries?"

Rice replied: "I would not like to speculate on the president's constitutional authority or to say anything that would abridge his constitutional authority as commander in chief. The American people and the Congress expect the president to do what is necessary..."

Biden responded that, in his view, the vote to authorize the use of

force in Iraq did not cover a plan "to invade Iran or Syria," and that any such action would require a fresh authorization.

He subsequently added: "I just want the record to show—and I would like to have a legal response from the State Department if they think they have the authority to pursue networks or anything else across the border into Iran and Syria—that will generate a constitutional confrontation here in the Senate, I predict to you."

This exchange pointed to the main concerns underlying the sharpness of the opposition to Bush's plan expressed at the hearings, as well as the narrow parameters of that opposition.

There is clearly a fear in Congress that the legislative branch confronts in the Bush administration a clique that is not only prepared to defy the overwhelmingly antiwar sentiment of the American people, as expressed in the November congressional elections and every opinion poll published since the election, but is bent on spreading the war well beyond the borders of Iraq, and will brook no interference from Congress.

Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel, a Republican and Vietnam War veteran, put the matter most starkly. He told Rice: "Based on what the president said last night, you cannot sit here today and tell the American people that we will not engage the Syrians and Iranians across the border. Some of us remember 1970... And when our government lied to the American people and said we didn't cross the border and go into Cambodia, in fact we did... I have to say that I think this speech given last night by this president represents the most dangerous foreign policy blunder for this country since Vietnam..."

The political isolation of the administration could not have been starker. In addition to all of the Democrats and Hagel, Republicans Norm Coleman of Minnesota and George Voinovich of Ohio spoke out against the Bush plan. With only one exception, Johnny Isakson of Georgia, the other Republicans expressed various degrees of skepticism.

Biden was able to tell Rice: "I hope you'll convey to the president that you heard 21 members, with one or two notable exceptions, expressing outright hostility, disagreement and/or overwhelming concern with the president's proposal."

The rapidly eroding support for the war within the military itself found expression the same day at Bush's carefully staged appearance before soldiers at Fort Benning, Georgia. Members of the Third Infantry Division, Third Brigade, stationed there, have already served two tours in Iraq, and some were notified Thursday that they would be sent for a third starting in mid-March, two months ahead of schedule, as a result of the escalation announced by Bush.

Press reports described the soldiers' response to the president's pep talk as polite, bordering on sullen. White House officials had promised

journalists that they would be allowed to talk with the troops, but the base commander, Maj. Gen. Walter Wojdakowski, forbade it.

Despite all of this, congressional critics of Bush's war policy find themselves in a dilemma, because their differences with the White House's incendiary and reckless policy are tactical, not principled.

Their opposition is not based on the fact that the war is illegal, was launched on the basis of lies, has killed hundreds and thousands of Iraqis and destroyed an entire society. They have no problem with an imperialist enterprise aimed at seizing control of Iraq's oil wealth and establishing US domination of the Middle East. The Democratic Party leadership supports such a goal, which is why it backed the 2003 invasion. Rather, the congressional opposition is based on the Bush administration's incompetent conduct of the war and its failure to win it.

This gives the administration and its congressional supporters, who include the Democrats' 2000 vice presidential candidate Senator Joseph Lieberman, enormous leverage, despite the fact that they are hated and despised by a large majority of Americans and enjoy dwindling support within Congress itself.

The Bush administration represents most consistently the drive of the American ruling elite for hegemony in the Middle East and internationally. All factions of both parties, critics of Bush's war policy no less than its supporters, are committed to the defense of the basic interests of this ruling elite.

Hence there was bipartisan support at the hearings for Defense Secretary Gates's announcement that he had authorized a major and permanent increase in the size of the US Army and Marines for the "long war against terrorism."

Administration spokesmen counter the complaints of their congressional critics with the repeated assertion that a withdrawal from Iraq would be seen as a defeat for the United States and would have catastrophic implications for US interests all over the world. They demand from their establishment critics an alternative plan that would avoid such a failure, and their critics are incapable of advancing an alternative that is viable from the standpoint of US imperialism.

Thus, Rice began her testimony with the assertion: "We all know that the stakes in Iraq are enormous. And we all share the belief that the situation in Iraq is unacceptable. On this we are united." She returned to this theme in her conclusion, declaring that it is "a national imperative not to fail in Iraq."

Gates was even more insistent. "Whatever one's view of the original decision to go to war and the decisions that brought us to this point," he said in his opening remarks to the Senate Armed Services Committee, "there is broad agreement that failure in Iraq would be a calamity for our nation of lasting historical consequence."

He listed among these consequences "an emboldened Iran," "a humiliating defeat in the overall campaign against violent extremism worldwide," and "an undermining of the credibility of the United States."

At the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Republican Senator John McCain, a proponent of an even greater military escalation in Iraq than that proposed by Bush, demanded of congressional advocates of a pullback: "Those who advocate such a policy... have a responsibility to tell us what they believe are the consequences of withdrawal in Iraq."

Behind the sharp rhetoric of the critics, there is a strong element of desperation and a longing to craft a bipartisan approach by Congress and the White House to achieve "success" in Iraq. Biden exemplified this.

Declaring that he could not "in good conscience" support Bush's approach, he concluded his remarks by saying: "Because so much is at stake, I am also not prepared to give up on finding a bipartisan way forward... Failure in Iraq will not be confined to Iraq—it will do terrible damage to our ability to protect American interests all over the world, and for a long time to come. That's why we have to continue to work together to find a solution—a solution that will gain the support of our citizens."

Biden, who is an announced candidate for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, has attacked as "unconstitutional" any attempt by Congress to cut off or even limit funds for the war in Iraq. Proposals to cut off war funding, which are, according to opinion polls, supported by a majority of Americans, have been endorsed by only a handful of Democratic congressmen and one senator, Russell Feingold of Wisconsin.

A bill introduced by Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy to require congressional authorization to pay for additional troop deployments to Iraq—itsself a half-measure since it would continue funding for the existing military occupation—has been largely ignored by Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid and Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and is openly opposed by leading Democrats such as Biden and the head of the Democratic House caucus Rahm Emanuel.

The Democratic leadership is conducting a balancing act, trying to appear to reflect the mass antiwar sentiment of the population, while rejecting any action to actually end the slaughter. The Bush administration has upped the ante by shifting to a policy of escalation and a vast intensification of violence in Iraq, combined with stepped-up military provocations against Iran.

At present, the Democratic Senate leadership is limiting its response to a symbolic, non-binding, resolution for a phased "redeployment" of troops, to be introduced next week. The House leadership is delaying even this tepid measure.

Other legislative maneuvers are contemplated. On Friday, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius wrote, approvingly, of a proposal by Democratic Representative John Murtha "to set strict standards for readiness—which would make it hard to finance the troop surge in Iraq without beefing up the military as a whole." He continued: "The idea is to position the Democrats as friends of the military, even as they denounce Bush's Iraq policy."



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