Senate Republicans call Democrats' bluff on Iraq war resolution

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The so-called "debate" over Iraq in the US Senate suffered an ignominious collapse this week, as the Republicans, working with the White House, exploited the two-faced position of the Democrats to torpedo their effort to pass a non-binding resolution opposing the administration's military escalation.

The result was no debate and no vote on a measure that would have done nothing, in any case, to halt the deployment of an additional 21,500 American combat troops to Iraq, an escalation that is already well underway.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat of Nevada) summed it up best in a barb that, while meant for Senate Republican leaders, actually described the entire proceedings: "This is all a game to divert attention from the fact that we have before us now an issue that the American people want us to address."

What Reid failed to add was that the Democratic-backed compromise resolution—drafted by Republican Senator John Warner of Virginia and cosponsored by Democrat Carl Levin of Michigan—was itself an evasion of the real demand of the majority of the American people for an end to the Iraq war and the withdrawal of US troops.

Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (Democrat of Illinois), in criticizing the Republican minority, acknowledged the toothless character of the resolution he and the rest of the Democratic leadership was backing. "If the Republicans in the Senate cannot swallow the thin soup of the Warner resolution," he asked, "how are they going to stomach a real debate on Iraq?"

The resolution merely expressed disagreement with the "surge" in troop levels ordered by the White House, while pledging that Congress would not eliminate or cut funding for "troops in the field." It supported the administration's claim that the president, as "commander-in-chief," has unfettered power to determine the course of the war. Finally, it expressed general support for continuing the war, stating in its preamble, "[T]he United States' strategy and operations in Iraq can only be sustained and achieved with support from the American people and with a level of bipartisanship."

The Republicans were able to easily outflank the Democratic leadership and block a debate on the resolution by exploiting this underlying bipartisan support for the US aggression in Iraq.

The Republicans insisted that not only the Democratic-backed resolution be debated and brought to a vote, but also two opposing Republican resolutions. The first, drafted by Arizona Senator John McCain, supported the "surge" while calling for benchmarks to be imposed on the Iraqi government. The second, drafted by New Hampshire Senator Judd Gregg, took no position on the escalation in Iraq, but affirmed that "no funds should be cut off or reduced for American troops in the field."

The White House and the Senate Republicans, as well as the Democratic leadership, knew that the Democrats could not obtain the 60 votes needed to initiate a debate and vote on the Warner-Levin resolution, while the Gregg resolution would easily exceed the 60-vote hurdle. This was so because many Democrats, petrified of being attacked for "not supporting the troops," would vote for the White House-backed measure. The result would be passage of a resolution essentially supporting the administration's war policy.

Consequently, the Democratic leadership refused the Republicans' offer to allow all three resolutions to be debated and voted on.

An attempt to obtain the required three-fifth's

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majority to bring the Warner-Levin resolution to the floor failed badly, receiving only 49 votes. All but two Republicans voted against, including its author, Warner, as well as other prominent Republican backers of the anti-"surge" resolution such as Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska.

Explaining why Gregg's proposal would have garnered substantial Democratic support—and displaying in the process the utter cowardice and duplicity of the Democrats' position—Majority Leader Reid said, "There isn't a Democrat here that wants to take monies away from the troops."

All the talk about "supporting the troops" is a threadbare political subterfuge for continuing to support the war. It is obvious that on such a basis no serious action can to taken to stop the mass killing of Iraqis and the mounting toll of dead and wounded Americans.

This phony argument is used by the Democrats as an alibi for not employing one of the constitutional means at their disposal to end the war—cutting off funds.

Gregg's resolution amounted to calling the Democrats' bluff. Administration spokesmen and congressional Republicans have dared the Democrats to back up their criticisms of Bush's war policy by making use of the power of the purse to withhold funds, knowing that the Democrats have no stomach for such action and are desperate to avoid a constitutional confrontation with the White House.

Now the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives has vowed to hold its own debate on a nonbinding resolution beginning next Tuesday. Simpler House rules allow a resolution to be brought to the floor and passed by a straight majority vote.

The House Democratic leaders had planned to introduce a carbon copy of the Senate's Warner-Levin resolution. However, the *Washington Post* reported Wednesday that "after assessing the morass on the other side of the Capitol, they are now considering a more narrow statement of objection to Bush's proposal."

The Senate Democrats' evasion of Gregg's resolution is an indication of what is to come.

This will soon become apparent as Congress considers the Bush administration's budget proposal, calling for a staggering $245 billion more to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Included in this funding proposal is $5.6 billion to pay for deploying the 21,500 troops that make up Bush's "surge."

The failure of the Senate to even conduct a debate on the war exposes the deepening crisis of democratic processes in the US. An election in which a majority of the people decisively repudiated the policies of the Bush administration and expressed a clear desire for the Iraq war to be ended is ignored. The views of the broad mass of people can find no reflection within the official institutions or either of the two parties.

Both parties represent the interests of a financial oligarchy that is determined to assert US hegemony in the oil-rich Persian Gulf by means of military force. It is these profit interests that lie behind the mantra repeated by both Republican and Democratic politicians that "failure is not an option."

The ludicrous spectacle of a non-vote on a nonbinding resolution as the carnage in Iraq mounts is one more verification that the demand for the withdrawal of US troops cannot be realized through reliance on Congress and the Democrats. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working people against war and the system that creates it.

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