

Congressional Democrats rule out Iraq war fund cutoff

Patrick Martin
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Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, flatly rejected Sunday any attempt to cut off funding for the US war in Iraq, calling such an action “immoral” and declaring his party’s commitment to the “success” of the American occupation of Iraq.

Levin made his comments on NBC television’s “Meet the Press” program, after a week in which Democratic leaders in both the House of Representatives and Senate effectively abandoned any effort to impose binding legislative limits on the war in Iraq—spurning popular antiwar sentiment, which continues to grow.

In the three months after the November 7 election, in which mass opposition to the war in Iraq handed control of Congress to the Democrats, the Democratic Party has demonstrated that it is just as desirous as the Republicans of maintaining US control of Iraq and reducing the oil-rich country to the status of an American semi-colony.

Levin told NBC interviewer Tim Russert that the Senate Democratic leadership had decided to move forward with a resolution to repeal the October 2002 congressional authorization for the use of military force in Iraq and replace it with more narrowly drawn language.

Explicitly ruling out a complete withdrawal of American forces from Iraq—the position supported by clear majorities of the American people in all recent polls—Levin said, “We don’t believe that it’s going to be possible to remove all of our troops from Iraq because there’s going to be a limited purpose that they’re going to need to serve, including continued training of the Iraqi army, support for logistics in the Iraqi army, a counterterrorism purpose or a mission because there’s about 5,000 Al Qaida in Iraq. So we want to—we want to transform, or we want to modify that earlier resolution to more limited purpose. That is our goal.”

He added that the plan to reduce the combat role of American troops while maintaining a sizeable force in Iraq indefinitely would follow the pattern proposed by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, which the Bush administration has rejected in favor of an escalation of military operations in Baghdad and Anbar province.

“The key issue is do we want American troops in the middle of a civil war,” Levin said. “That’s the fundamental issue which we want to debate. Almost all the Democrats, plus a few Republicans, do not want to get in the middle of that civil war.”

The Democrats do not want to debate the legitimacy of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, a violation of international law that the Democratic congressional leadership supported. They oppose the Bush administration’s conduct of the war and current war policy not out of any principled opposition to militarism or neo-colonialism, but because the policy has produced a military and political disaster for US imperialism. Their goal is to salvage the US intervention, prevent an outright defeat and secure the basic war aims—first and foremost, US control of the country’s oil resources.

Levin did not acknowledge that the sectarian strife is the inevitable product of the US invasion, the shattering of the Iraqi state and the

continued occupation, nor did his interviewer suggest as much.

Russert cited the declaration by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (Republican of Kentucky) that the only way for Democrats to end the war was to cut off funding. “Why don’t Democrats do what Senator McConnell says that they could do, cut off funding for the war?” he asked.

Levin’s reply should dispel any illusions that the Democratic Party intends to put an end to the war in Iraq. “Most of us do not want to cut funding for our troops for two reasons,” he said. “One is, it’s wrong. Our troops deserve our support as long as they’re there, and we’re not going to repeat the mistake of Vietnam where we took out on the troops our differences over policies with the administration. Our differences are with the commander in chief and his policies, and we’re going to fund the troops as long as they’re there.

“Secondly, because that resolution would lose, the president would then use the defeat of a cut-the-funding resolution as a way of supporting his policy. So we would be playing right into the hands of the president and his policy makers by having a losing vote on funding.”

It is worth examining these arguments in some detail, as they epitomize the mixture of distortion, evasion and political cowardice that characterizes the Democrats’ maneuvers on Iraq, behind which stands their support for US imperialism and its drive for hegemony in the Middle East and around the world.

Levin’s first claim is that cutting off funding for military operations is illegitimate and represents an attack on the American troops themselves. This is bogus both historically and constitutionally. If taken literally, it would amount to a complete surrender of decision-making power on matters of war and peace to the executive branch.

There is, in fact, a centuries-long tradition of parliaments and other legislative bodies imposing their will on the executive by cutting off funding for wars or making the funding conditional on certain military policies. The US Congress has repeatedly done so, not only during the Vietnam period—where Levin grossly distorts the record—but more recently.

In the 1980s, Congress used its funding power to force a withdrawal of US troops from Lebanon and ban support for the Contra rebels in Nicaragua (prompting illegal efforts by the Reagan administration to circumvent the legislation, which erupted in the Iran-Contra scandal). In the 1990s, congressional action brought an end to the US military presence in Somalia and limited US participation in military operations in the former Yugoslavia.

In relation to Vietnam, Levin recycles the right-wing myth that “we took out on the troops our differences over policies with the administration.” This represents a pledge on his part that the Democrats will never cave in to antiwar forces today, as their Republican opponents claim they did during the Vietnam era.

There was a faction within the leadership of the Democratic Party that turned against the Vietnam War and sought to end it, and the absence of

any genuine antiwar wing of the Democratic Party today underscores the rightward evolution of the party as a whole in the intervening years.

Nevertheless, Congress never actually cut off funding for US troops in Vietnam, despite the massive and sustained opposition to the war that developed among the American people. There were some restrictions imposed on escalation of the war, including a ban on invading North Vietnam and limits on US military actions in Cambodia and Laos. The cutoff of funds voted by Congress in 1974, after US troops had been withdrawn, applied only to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the puppet military force which was already on its last legs and ultimately collapsed in April 1975.

Right-wing elements, many of them prominent in the current administration, have in recent years promoted the claim that congressional action sabotaged what would otherwise have been a successful American policy in Vietnam, but this pretense is absurd. As Henry Kissinger admitted, the Nixon administration was well aware of the hopelessness of the Saigon regime, and only wanted “a decent interval” between the final US troop withdrawal, in 1973, and the collapse of the puppet state two years later.

The rewriting of the history of the Vietnam War plays a similar role in American politics that the “stab-in-the-back” theory did in the politics of Germany in the 1920s. The Nazis repeatedly claimed that Germany’s defeat in World War I resulted not from the superior strength of the Allies after American entry into the war, but from the actions of the “enemy within”—socialists, communists and Jews—who supposedly betrayed the fatherland. In like fashion, the Vietnam defeat is used by American bourgeois politicians, liberal as well as conservative, to argue that any serious and effective opposition to American military operations abroad is illegitimate.

Such methods of intimidation rely on the biggest of the many lies in the current official “debate” over Iraq: the claim that a funding cutoff would somehow harm the US troops deployed in Iraq. This claim is advanced as if self-evident, as though the legislation would leave American soldiers stranded on the battlefield without bullets or armor.

It is, of course, perfectly feasible to draft legislation requiring the Pentagon to use funds appropriated for the war in Iraq to evacuate all US soldiers from that country by a definite—and early—date. Removing them would put a stop to the rising death toll among American soldiers, and bring to an end the basic cause of violent death among Iraqis: the American colonial occupation.

A handful of House Democrats have proposed such a bill, but this serves as little more than a left cover for the right-wing policy of the party as a whole. There is little support for such a bill in the Democratic caucus, and none at all in the leadership.

According to a report in Sunday’s *Washington Post*, Congressman John Murtha announced his plans for a bill to restrict the deployment of troops based on readiness requirements to be certified by the Pentagon in order to “head off” the introduction of legislation calling for an immediate or rapid pullout. The Murtha bill has in turn been denounced by Democratic Senate leaders and more conservative House Democrats as overreaching, and is to be shelved in favor of an even less restrictive measure.

On “Meet the Press,” Levin rejected Russert’s well-founded suggestion that the Democrats were simply “afraid politically to cut off funding.” He replied, “It’s not a fear of politically of doing it . . . It’s the wrong thing to do morally in terms of the message it sends to the troops.”

Presumably it is, on the other hand, “moral” to continue the slaughter of Iraqis and the sacrifice American soldiers and squandering of hundreds of billions of dollars in an unprovoked war of aggression that was launched on the basis of lies.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Murtha, Levin, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and other leading Democrats have embraced the “support the troops” mantra as a pretext for maintaining the US occupation of Iraq

more or less indefinitely. The effect of this posture is to empower President Bush to wage war wherever and whenever he pleases. He simply orders the troops deployed, exercising his powers as “commander-in-chief,” then demands congressional backing in the name of “support” for the soldiers, who become little more than hostages of the Bush administration’s program of international aggression.

The utter cynicism of both parties and all the institutions of official Washington can be seen in the revelations of the past week over conditions at Walter Reed Medical Center, the main military complex for treatment of US soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. A four-month-long investigation by the *Washington Post* found hundreds of wounded soldiers living as outpatients on the grounds of the Medical Center, in buildings infested with rats and roaches, poorly cleaned and maintained, and not receiving the care made necessary by the physical and psychological damage caused by the wars.

In the upside-down world of American imperialism, those who posture as advocates for the troops want to kill more of them, and warehouse the shattered survivors of combat in squalid conditions, while those who want an end to the killing and maiming are demonized for their supposed failure to “support the troops.”

Levin’s other main argument against a funding cutoff is that it is politically unfeasible, given the narrow Democratic majority in the Senate, and that failure to push through such a measure would strengthen the Bush administration. It is hard to know whether cowardice or deception plays a larger part in this argument, which might be described as a strategy of “preemptive capitulation.” Because Bush and congressional Republicans will oppose such a fund cutoff, Levin declares, the Democrats should not even attempt it.

Towards the end of his appearance on “Meet the Press,” Levin dropped any pretense of appealing to antiwar sentiment. Responding to smears by Vice President Cheney, who suggested in televised comments during his tour of Asia that congressional Democratic critics were validating the strategy of Al Qaeda, Levin said, “No, quite the opposite. Our proposal is an effort to try to succeed in Iraq . . . the strategy which has been followed is a losing strategy. It is a failing strategy. And if we want to succeed in Iraq, we’ve got to find ways to change that strategy.”

Levin’s wish for success—echoed by all the leading candidates for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination—demonstrates that the installation of a Democrat in the White House in two years time would do nothing to bring an end to the aggressive designs of American imperialism.

The only principled basis for the struggle against the war in Iraq is to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of American, British and all other foreign forces. Those responsible for launching the war—Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice and dozens of other top officials—should face prosecution before an international tribunal. This requires the building of an independent political movement from below, mobilizing working people, youth and students against the two parties that represent the American corporate elite.



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