

Steny Hoyer at the Brookings Institution

House majority leader lays out Democratic position on Iraq

Barry Grey in Washington DC
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In a January 26 speech at the Brookings Institution, Steny Hoyer, the Democratic majority leader of the House of Representatives in the new 110th Congress, spelled out the basis on which the Democratic leadership is criticizing the Bush administration's military escalation in Iraq.

His speech demonstrated two essential facts: first, that whatever the divergences over tactics, there are no principled differences between the Democrats and the Bush administration when it comes to the war in Iraq and the broader imperialist agenda of the United States; and second, that there exists a vast gulf between the revulsion most Americans feel toward the Iraq war and the duplicitous, half-hearted opposition of Bush's critics within the political establishment.

Introducing the 14-term congressman from Washington's Maryland suburbs, Brookings President Strobe Talbott, former deputy secretary of state in the Clinton administration, stressed Hoyer's Cold War credentials as chairman of the Helsinki Commission in the 1980s and his strong support for the US military intervention in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, culminating in the 1999 air war against Serbia. "Mr. Hoyer is a long-time champion of human rights and the effective use of American power, both hard and soft," Talbott said.

In the course of his remarks, Hoyer made clear that he opposed a cutoff of funding for the war as well as any near-term withdrawal of US troops. He not only defended his October 2002 vote in favor of the congressional authorization for military action against Iraq, he underlined his support for the invasion and occupation the following March.

Hoyer said he considered the administration's decision to justify the war "on a preemption theory due to [Saddam Hussein's] alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction" to have been "a mistake," and noted that he advised then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice at a White House meeting on February 5, 2003 to utilize a different pretext—the claim that Iraq had violated United Nations resolutions.

The UN, he asserted, should have sanctioned military action to overthrow Hussein because the "civilized world" has a "collective obligation" to act against "an international lawbreaker who threatens peace and stability"—a description which a large majority of the world's people would more readily apply to George W. Bush.

He then declared: "I would not have supported House Joint Resolution 114 had I known then what I know now: that the United States of America could and would prosecute a war and manage a nation-building effort in such an incompetent, arrogant, unplanned and unsuccessful manner."

Not, in other words, because of the government's lies about weapons of mass destruction and Iraq-Al Qaeda ties; not because of the mass killing of Iraqi civilians, torture, rape, the destruction of Iraqi society—but because the colonialist project was carried out in an incompetent manner.

And the main reason for its failure? After the politically mandatory praise for "our men and women in uniform," Hoyer declared: "... when the history of this war is recounted, I believe one colossal misjudgment will stand out: the failure of this administration to heed the advice of military experts to put enough troops on the ground at the outset of

hostilities to secure and stabilize a nation of 26 million people.”

He proceeded to argue, by analogy to the US-NATO war in Kosovo, that the US should have dispatched 500,000 troops to conquer the more populous Iraq and subjugate its people.

This ostensible critic of Bush’s war plan went on to say, “I hope that this ‘new strategy’ works. We all do. But based upon the facts and record before us, my expectations are not high.”

Such is the content of the Democratic Party leadership’s critique of Bush’s policy in Iraq. As for their alternative, Hoyer reiterated the general Democratic mantra of a “transition [of] the principal mission of our forces from combat to training, logistics, force protection and counterterrorism,” a “phased redeployment of US forces within the next six months,” and “an aggressive diplomatic strategy, both within the region and beyond.”

This is, needless to say, a formula for the indefinite maintenance of US occupation forces in the country.

Hoyer placed the greatest stress on what he called “the continuing obligation of the international community to help stabilize Iraq.” This amounted to an effort to shift, as much as possible, the burden of the catastrophe created by the US in Iraq onto the rest of the world.

This would include a drive to extort money from the oil-rich countries in the region to help finance the ongoing US occupation. “For example,” Hoyer said, “in the first Gulf War, the United States contributed less than \$10 billion of the total war cost of \$61 billion, while Saudi Arabia and Kuwait contributed \$36 billion and Germany and Japan gave \$16 billion.”

The congressman concluded by approvingly citing the recent remark of the new UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, that “Iraq is the whole world’s problem.”

In the question-and-answer period, an exchange occurred that established in unambiguous terms the reactionary standpoint of Hoyer and the Democratic leadership.

This reporter asked the following question: “Congressman, it seems to me in listening to your remarks that, in the end, you are critical of the conduct of the war not because the invasion and occupation were either wrong or illegal—the UN Security Council did not support it and preemption, which you say is a

mistake, is a violation of the Nuremburg principles—but because it hasn’t worked. I would like you to respond to that.”

Hoyer began his lengthy reply as follows: “I think there is much truth in that, in terms of that being my position. As I posited, I believe that action against Saddam Hussein was justified. I believe the United Nations should have taken that action. They failed to do so...”

He continued by noting the bipartisan support for a policy of aggression against Iraq that preceded the administration of George W. Bush and the 2003 invasion. “I think the basic premise of your question is accurate,” he said. “I voted to authorize, as you know. You may know that in 1998 Congress almost unanimously, over 350 votes in the House and unanimously in the United States Senate, passed a resolution saying it was the policy of the United States to remove the Hussein regime because of the human rights violations he was visiting on his people and the violation of international conditions that had been imposed on him and the violations of international law.”

There could hardly be a clearer statement of the complicity of the Democratic Party in the United States government’s criminal enterprise in Iraq.



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