

# Democrats “withdrawal” plan paves way to escalation of Iraq war

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Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic congressional leaders unveiled a toothless plan Thursday that they claim would result in the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq a year and a half from now. The main purpose of this political exercise, however, is to unite the party behind supplemental funding legislation that will provide at least \$100 billion more to pay for the escalation of the illegal war and occupation that has been waged by Washington for the past four years.

The stated aim of the Democratic leadership is to “unify” the party’s congressional caucus behind a “consensus” position. The instrument for doing this has been crafted to allow the Democrats to posture as opponents of the Iraq war, while providing the Bush White House with both the money and the unrestricted power to continue it.

The measure, which represents the watering down of already watered-down proposals to indirectly limit the powers of the Bush White House in waging the war, comes only three weeks after the House Democrats passed a symbolic, nonbinding resolution opposing the administration’s “surge,” which involves the deployment of at least 26,000 more US troops in a security crackdown in Baghdad.

In essence, this new legislation is just as nonbinding, when it comes to tying the hands of the administration, but it will be anything but symbolic in its provision of funds for the surge that the Democrats ostensibly oppose, sending more US troops to kill and be killed in the dirty colonial war that is being waged against the Iraqi people.

The plan announced by the Democrats would require Bush to certify to Congress on July 1 and again on October 1 that the Iraqi government is making progress in achieving the “benchmarks” that the US president himself laid out in his January speech announcing the escalation of the US intervention. Why anyone would accept the administration’s word on the supposed progress was not explained. Bush called the situation in Iraq “encouraging” Tuesday, amid news of horrific bombings that left hundreds of Iraqis dead and attacks that claimed the lives of at least 13 more US soldiers this week.

Given that Bush claims progress is being made, the Democratic plan would call for US combat troops to begin “redeploying” by March 1, 2008 and complete withdrawal by September 1 of next year. Given present casualty rates—which are expected to rise significantly with the new counterinsurgency operation in Baghdad—this would mean approximately 1,500 more American soldiers killed, and many times more Iraqis.

Supposedly, if the benchmarks—which include Iraqi forces taking responsibility for security and the government in Baghdad enacting legislation opening up Iraq’s oil reserves for exploitation—are not achieved, the deadlines for withdrawal would be moved up.

As the *Wall Street Journal* noted, the proposed legislation would

give the administration “a relatively free hand to increase US forces in Iraq.” The paper added, “The crucial language, threatening an earlier withdrawal, appears more of a policy statement than a strict use of the power of the purse, because the funding bill itself runs out Sept. 30,” well before any of the so-called “deadlines” for troop withdrawal go into effect.

The plan also took out what little teeth remained in a proposal, associated with Representative John Murtha (Democrat, Pennsylvania), that would have required the Pentagon to fully abide by readiness and training standards. This measure would ostensibly have barred the redeployment of units that lacked mandated training, equipment and recuperation, and precluded extending deployment of Army and Marine units for more than 365 and 210 days respectively. The result would have been to prevent the escalation of the war, as the military does not have enough units that are adequately trained, equipped and rested for deployment in Iraq.

The final plan, however, grants Bush the power to issue waivers of these standards if he deems it in the “national interest.” The effect of this change is not to put any roadblock in the way of the administration’s plan to send five additional combat brigades to the Iraqi capital over the next few months.

Moreover, the bottom line of the proposed Democratic legislation is that it does not call for a complete withdrawal of US occupation forces from Iraq under any circumstances. Rather, it would leave tens of thousands of American soldiers behind under various pretexts: training Iraqi forces, conducting the “war on terror,” and protecting American facilities, including a massive new embassy. The real purpose of their continued presence would be to assert the dominance of American energy conglomerates over Iraq’s lucrative oil fields.

## A call for escalating the Afghanistan intervention

It is significant that the Democratic leadership felt compelled to cloak even this mealy-mouthed proposal in the language of robust militarism. Pelosi and other congressional Democrats presented their plan for withdrawing US troops from Iraq as a means of escalating the intervention in Afghanistan, where stepped-up US attacks have claimed the lives of dozens of civilians in the past week.

“Only then can we refocus our military efforts on Afghanistan to the extent that we must,” said Pelosi, in calling for passage of the legislation. Representative David Obey (Wisconsin), the Democratic chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, added that the

proposal “will essentially redirect more of our resources to the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, fighting the right war in the right place against the people who attacked us and who are giving Al Qaeda sanctuary.”

The Democratic proposal would add \$1.2 billion to Bush’s request for supplemental funds in order to provide for an escalation of the US intervention in Afghanistan.

On the eve of the Democrats’ announcement, the Pentagon revealed plans for augmenting the “surge” with thousands more American troops. Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced on Wednesday that the Pentagon has approved a request to send an additional 2,200 military police to Iraq. This force has been requested by American commanders in anticipation of the mass roundup and imprisonment of Iraqis, creating a host of new Abu Ghraibs throughout the country.

These additional troops come on top of the 21,500 combat troops that Bush announced he was sending in January. Another 2,400 support troops are being sent, and Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England told a House Budget Committee hearing Tuesday that that number could rise to 7,000, adding billions of dollars more to the cost of the war.

Meanwhile, the senior US commanders in Iraq made it clear that the “surge” announced by Bush in January is anything but temporary. Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, the commanding officer of ground troops in Iraq, indicted that the escalation force would have to continue for a full year to achieve its goals. Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of all US forces in the country, echoed this assessment in press briefing Thursday, declaring, “If you’re going to achieve the kinds of effects that we probably need, than it would need to be sustained certainly for some time well beyond the summer.” He also was careful not to rule out the prospect of an even greater number of combat troops being deployed in the country.

The media, including most liberal commentators, have chosen to focus on the internal wrangling within the Democratic Party, presenting Pelosi’s proposal as a kind of balancing act between a supposedly militant antiwar faction and so-called “Blue Dog” Democrats, who cannot bear to be seen challenging the president as “commander-in-chief.”

While no doubt the Democratic Party is sharply divided, the essence of this conflict is not between different shades of opinion on Capitol Hill. Rather, it is between the party leadership as a whole, which reflects the determination of predominant layers within the ruling elite to achieve the original goals of the Iraq war—the domination of the region and its oil wealth—and the vast majority of those who voted for the party last November, who want an immediate end to the war and the withdrawal of all US troops.

It is this contradiction that underlies the appearance of weakness, perplexity and indecision that pervades the Democrats’ every action, despite the overwhelming victory that the party achieved in the midterm election.

Congress is controlled by two right-wing parties controlled by big business, both of which supported the invasion of Iraq. The Democrats, however, have attempted to appeal to a constituency that is overwhelmingly against the war, exploiting hostility to Bush, while supporting the fundamental strategic aims that his administration pursued in launching this war. The Democratic Party, as its leaders continuously reiterate, remains committed to “success” in Iraq, a concept that implies the suppression of Iraqi resistance to US semi-colonial domination.

This is the essential political reality that underlies the Democrats’

phony claim that intractable constitutional dilemmas preclude them from cutting off funding for the war—though Congress has done precisely that in a number of previous overseas US interventions—and the assertions like that of Michigan’s Democratic Senator Carl Levin that to cut off funding would be the “wrong thing to do morally in terms of the message it sends to the troops,” when the message would be a plane ride home.

It is neither the Constitution nor troop morale that explain the Democrats’ refusal to mount a serious challenge to the war, but rather the geo-strategic aims of American imperialism and the profit interests of the US-based energy corporations and banks.

The so-called Out of Iraq caucus, which includes California Democratic Representatives Maxine Waters, Barbara Lee and Lynn Woolsey, is in the final analysis a left prop for a thoroughly reactionary, pro-war party. Their criticism of the Democratic leadership serves not to shift the party to the left, but rather to feed the illusions of sections of the protest movement that in turn promote the idea that the Democratic Party can serve as a shortcut in the struggle against war.

According to press reports, Pelosi and the House Democratic leadership are considering allowing this caucus to bring their amendment calling for the withdrawal of US troops by the end of this year to a vote as a means of letting off steam. In return, they would expect caucus members to join fellow Democrats in approving the increased war funding.

The struggle to end the Iraq war and to prevent even bloodier interventions already being planned can only be successfully waged through the building of a mass movement based upon working people and youth that is completely independent of the Congress, the Democratic Party and all of its factions. Such a movement must be built on the demands for the unconditional and immediate withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and for all those responsible for launching this war to be held politically and criminally responsible.



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