

A revealing encounter in the halls of Congress

## Leading Democrat denounces “idiot liberals” for demanding cutoff of war funds

Barry Grey in Washington DC  
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An incident occurred last week that revealed the real attitude of the Democratic Party leadership to the vast majority of the American people who are opposed to the war in Iraq and want to see it quickly ended.

Rep. David Obey (Democrat from Wisconsin), a 20-term congressman who chairs the powerful House Appropriations Committee in the new, Democratic-controlled 110th Congress, lashed out at the mother of a Marine and another antiwar activist when they approached him in a congressional corridor and asked if he planned to vote against a supplemental funding bill to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Unfortunately for Obey and the Democratic Party, the entire exchange, which occurred March 5, was videotaped and posted on the YouTube Internet site. Last Thursday night a blogger sent the video clip to Washington reporters, and by Saturday it was being widely reported in the national press. The video can be accessed at [www.grassrootsamerica4us.org](http://www.grassrootsamerica4us.org).

Obey is the lead sponsor of a supplemental war funding bill announced last week by the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives. The measure is an attempt by the Democrats to present a bill granting the Bush administration's request for more than \$100 billion to continue and escalate the war in Iraq as a plan to end the war.

It does this by attaching various conditions—none of which actually restrict the ability of the administration to further escalate the war—and stipulating that US combat troops must begin “redeploying” from Iraq by March 1, 2008 and completely withdraw by September 8 of next year. (See “Democrats’ ‘withdrawal’ plan paves way to escalation of Iraq war”)

Even after that date, however, the bill would allow for the continued presence of tens of thousands of supposedly

non-combat US troops in Iraq—to carry out “anti-terrorism” missions, protect US installations and train Iraqi forces. And Democratic leaders have stressed that their plan will allow the US to expand its military intervention in Afghanistan. As Obey himself stated, the Democratic bill “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...”

The video clip initially posted on YouTube shows a woman, later identified as Tina Richards, and a colleague approaching Obey outside his office in the Rayburn House Office Building. Richards explains that her son is a Marine who has served two tours of duty in Iraq and is facing a third tour. She tells Obey her son suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and has attempted to commit suicide. “It took us six months to get his first appointment with the VA (Veterans Administration),” she tells the congressman. “They told him after ten minutes it sounds like you have childhood issues.”

Obey responds politely, if somewhat curtly, clearly anxious to end the discussion. However, when Richards asks him if he plans to vote against the supplemental war spending bill, he grows increasingly agitated.

“Absolutely not,” he declares, “I’m the sponsor of the supplemental. We’re trying to use the supplemental to end the war.... You can’t end the war if you go against the supplemental. It’s time these idiot liberals understand that.”

Obey goes on to raise the standard pretext of “supporting the troops” (by continuing to send them into battle): “I’m not going to deny the troops body armor,” he says. He follows with another sophistry, pointing to the Democrats’ proposal to add nearly a billion dollars for medical care for soldiers and veterans to Bush’s war spending request as further justification for voting to fund

the war. “I’m not going to deny funding for veterans’ hospitals and defense hospitals,” he declares, “That’s what you do if you vote against that bill.”

Richards attempts to speak, but Obey cuts her off, saying, “I hate the war. I voted against it to start with.... But we don’t have the votes to de-fund the war and we shouldn’t.”

When Richards raises an amendment, proposed by members of the House Democrats’ so-called “Out of Iraq Caucus,” to “fully fund the withdrawal of troops,” Obey shouts back, “That makes no sense.... The language we have in the resolution ends the authority for the war. It makes it illegal to proceed with the war. We don’t have to de-fund something if the war doesn’t exist.... The liberal groups are jumping around without knowing what the hell is in the bill.”

There is, in fact, nothing in the Democrats’ proposals, either in the House or the Senate, that makes the war illegal. How, indeed, could a bill that allocates another \$100 billion to fund the war at the same time end the authority to wage it?

Obey grows even louder and more hysterical when Richards’ companion intervenes and says the Democrats could end the war by cutting off funding. “How, if you don’t have the votes?” Obey demands. “You can filibuster his [Bush’s] supplemental request,” the man replies. “There is no filibuster in the House,” Obey shoots back. “In the Senate they can do it,” the man responds. “All they need is 40 votes.”

This perfectly legitimate point, which highlights the lack of any serious support among congressional Democrats for action to end the war, is too much for Obey. “I’m sorry,” he declares, “I’m the sponsor of the bill that’s going to be on the floor and that bill ends the war. And if that’s not good enough for you, you’re smoking something illegal.... I’m not going to debate anymore. Go talk to somebody else. Goodbye.”

With that, the congressman rushes into his office and slams the door behind him.

On Friday, after the video had circulated among reporters and on Capitol Hill, Obey issued an apology, of sorts. “I respect their passion on the issue,” he said, “I wish they would respect mine. We are both frustrated, and that led us to have an argument that we never should have had because we both want an end to US involvement in that war. What divided us was the question of how.”

Obey also told the newspaper *The Hill* he was already under a great deal of pressure when the encounter occurred with the two antiwar activists because protesters

had been sitting in at his Wisconsin district office. They had refused to leave and were arrested. “Let me be frank,” he told the newspaper, “That kind of encounter is the kind of frustration this stupid war is causing across the board.”

What Obey displayed toward his questioners was not mere frustration, but hostility and contempt. And the frustration Obey and the rest of the Democratic Party apparatus feel is not so much with the war, as with the mass popular opposition to the war.

The Democratic Party is entirely complicit in this colonialist enterprise, and fully defends the imperialist aims that underlie it. But having ridden to power in Congress on the back of the massive antiwar vote cast by the American electorate last November, the Democrats have the task of appearing to oppose the war while opposing any action that would lead to an outright defeat for the United States in the Middle East.

Obey’s assertion that he and the rest of the Democratic leadership are in agreement with the American people on ending “US involvement in that war,” and that the only question is how to do it, is false. The majority of Americans want to withdraw US troops and end the slaughter now because they know the war is based on lies and they sense it is being waged for deeply reactionary ends. Increasingly, they associate the war with the assault on their jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

The Democrats are critical of the war because it has produced a military and political disaster for US imperialism. As they repeatedly insist, they are just as committed as Bush to “success” in Iraq—meaning the suppression of the Iraqi resistance and the achievement of the basic war aims of the intervention, beginning with the establishment of US domination of the country’s vast oil reserves.

The difference between these two positions is not a matter of means or tactics, but an expression of the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the American ruling elite and those of the working class.



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