

US Senate votes \$122 billion in war funding while suggesting withdrawal “goal”

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28 March 2007

The US Senate voted Tuesday evening to narrowly approve Democratic language attached to a \$122 billion emergency war-spending bill that proposes a phased withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq, beginning four months after the bill is enacted and to be completed by March 2008.

The decision came through the defeat of a Republican amendment proposing to strip the withdrawal language from the legislation. The amendment, submitted by Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi, failed by a vote of 50 to 48, thanks only to two Republicans—Senators Chuck Hagel of Nebraska and Gordon Smith of Oregon—crossing party lines and voting to keep the withdrawal dates.

The vote followed several hours of debate on the floor of the Senate, in which both sides postured as defenders of US troops. As Democrats and Republicans delivered their speeches, two more Americans—a soldier and a contractor—were killed in rocket attack on Baghdad’s heavily fortified Green Zone.

Passage of the Senate war spending bill follows the passage last week of a similar bill in the House of Representatives. In both cases, the Democrats moved to supply Bush with the funds he requested to continue and escalate the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while adding language that would eventually reduce combat troops but leave tens of thousands of US forces in Iraq indefinitely.

Senate Republicans had earlier decided not to block the bill with a filibuster, as they did with an earlier nonbinding resolution opposing the Bush administration’s escalation of US troop strength in Iraq. Instead, they said they would rely on Bush to carry through his pledge to veto the legislation.

“We need to get the bill on down to the president and get the veto out of the way,” declared Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

The White House issued a statement Tuesday reiterating Bush’s threat of a veto, declaring that any withdrawal

provisions attached to the spending bill would “embolden our enemies.”

Senate Republicans echoed this same theme, portraying the Democratic proposal as tantamount to treason.

“This legislation is a plan for failure,” said Senator John McCain of Arizona, a candidate for the Republican 2008 presidential nomination. He added that the bill “demonstrates to the [Iraqi] government that they cannot rely on us. It tells the terrorists that they, not we, will prevail.”

Cochran, the sponsor of the Republican amendment, declared, “Congress should not be tying the hands of our commanders, or limiting their flexibility to respond to the threats on the battlefield.”

Senator Jon Kyl, an Arizona Republican, declared the call for a phased withdrawal “so destructive in the middle of a war that I just can’t believe my colleagues would actually contemplate doing it.”

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid insisted that the Democratic-sponsored bill “is good for the troops . . . because it lets the Iraqi government know that we’re serious.”

Robert Byrd, the West Virginia Democrat who now heads the Senate Appropriations Committee, which drafted the emergency spending bill, insisted on the power of Congress to act on the war. “Power of the purse, money,” he said heatedly. “Money! Money talks.”

However, the legislation under debate failed to exercise precisely that power. Instead of cutting off war funding, it provides all the money that the Bush administration asked for and more. As Byrd himself pointed out, “There is no restriction on funding for the troops.”

Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who calls himself an “independent Democrat” after losing the party’s primary because of his pro-war position and then winning the 2006 general election as an independent, voted with the Republicans.

Lieberman warned that Bush would veto the bill, adding, “In my opinion, he should veto it.” He added that it was obvious that the Democrats lacked the votes to override a veto in either the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Also voting with the Republicans for the Cochran amendment was Democratic Senator Pryor of Arkansas.

The Democrats have a 51 to 49 majority in the Senate if the two “independents”—Lieberman and Bernie Sanders of Vermont—vote with them. In this case, their thin majority was further narrowed by the absence of South Dakota Senator Tim Johnson, who has not been on the Senate floor for months after suffering a brain hemorrhage late last year.

In his intervention in favor of the legislation, Reid insisted that the bill represented a response to the antiwar mandate delivered at the polls in the 2006 midterm elections. “It offers a responsible strategy in Iraq that the people asked for last November,” he said.

In fact, the people voted not for a “responsible strategy in Iraq,” but for a rapid end to the war. A poll released on the eve of the votes in the House and Senate showed that nearly six out of ten Americans wanted to see their congressional representatives vote for a troop withdrawal, while barely one third hoped to see them oppose it.

The legislation passed by the Senate, like the House version of the bill, constitutes a cynical political swindle of the American people. It allows the Democrats to posture as opponents of the war, while providing massive amounts of money to ensure that the war continues.

The Senate legislation represents a watered-down version of the already toothless bill passed by the House, which called for US combat troops to be withdrawn by September 1, 2008. The House bill included multiple loopholes allowing the administration to invoke “national security” as a justification for ignoring provisions conditioning the deployment of US troops to Iraq on their having received adequate periods of training and recuperation.

Various Senate Democrats took pains to make it clear before the vote that they did not intend to impose any binding conditions on the Bush administration. Referring to the March 31, 2008 withdrawal date contained in the Senate bill, Senator Hillary Clinton, a leading contender for the party’s 2008 presidential nomination, declared, “It’s a goal, not a hard deadline.”

Similarly, Senator Evan Bayh (Democrat of Indiana) insisted that the withdrawal date represented “a goal with some flexibility.”

In the end, the House and Senate versions must be reconciled before being sent to the White House, where Bush insists he will veto any legislation even suggesting withdrawal dates. At that point, further negotiations are likely, which will in the end provide the war funding with no real strings attached.

Whatever the final outcome, the Democrats and Republicans are in agreement that the war and occupation will continue, despite the acrimonious debate over what tactics should be pursued. The call for the withdrawal of “combat troops,” as a number of leading Democrats have made clear, envisions leaving tens of thousands of US troops in Iraq, tasked with defending US facilities—including those connected to American control of the country’s oil fields—training Iraqi forces and carrying out rapid-reaction strikes to suppress resistance by the Iraqi people to continued American domination.

In his defense of the legislation, Senate Majority Leader Reid said that its purpose was to “send a message to President Bush that the time has come to find a new way forward in this intractable war.”

This is precisely what the bill represents—a Democratic proposal for continuing the war and finding a “way forward” towards achieving the original goals of the 2003 invasion: securing US control over Iraq’s vast oil wealth and using that power to bolster US dominance over its economic rivals in Europe and Asia.

Nearly five months after an election that expressed the overwhelming popular sentiment for ending the war in Iraq, tens of thousand more troops have been deployed and over \$100 billion more is being authorized by Democrats and Republicans alike to continue the criminal venture.



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