

Washington's Iraq funding "confrontation:" a dispute over tactics for continuing the war

Bill Van Auken
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With House and Senate Democrats having agreed Monday on a common piece of legislation providing over \$100 billion to pay for the continuation and escalation of the Iraq war, President George W. Bush called a Tuesday press conference to once again vow that he will veto the bill.

Using heated rhetoric, Bush all but branded the Democrats as traitors for drafting the measure, which the House is expected to pass Wednesday and the Senate the day after. He condemned the bill for its inclusion of language suggesting a timetable for withdrawing some of the US forces now occupying Iraq and for attaching billions of dollars in funding for non-military programs.

"I strongly believe that the Democrats' proposal would undermine our troops and threaten the safety of the American people here at home," declared Bush, who claimed that even the Congressional Democrats' non-binding goal for a US troop "redeployment" would allow the "enemy" to "begin plotting how to take over a country when we leave."

A withdrawal from Iraq, Bush added, would "embolden our enemies and confirm their belief that America is weak."

He accused the Democrats of attempting to "handcuff our generals" and "restricting the ability of our generals to direct the fight in Iraq."

Much of this argument amounts to a repudiation of the bedrock constitutional principle of civilian control of the military and the suggestion that the military commanders alone should determine US policy in Iraq. Of course, the Bush administration itself carried out a wholesale reshuffling of its military command in the region in order to install a group of senior officers committed to the policy of escalation favored by the White House.

The bill hammered out by the House-Senate conference committee amounted to a climb down from the legislation approved by the House on March 23. It jettisoned the so-called "binding deadline" included by the House Democrats in favor of a "redeployment goal" of April 1, 2008, with a proposed beginning of a drawdown of US forces by July 1 of this year. The Democratic leadership also bowed to Republican charges of loading the supplemental up with "pork" by stripping approximately \$140 million that had been earmarked for spinach farmers, peanut storage and the Christmas tree industry.

Left in the funding package—and rejected by the White House—were \$3 billion for base realignment and closure, \$2 billion for veterans' healthcare, close to \$7 billion for Gulf Coast hurricane relief and \$650 million for state child health insurance

programs.

As the Democratic leadership has made clear, the proposal both in its current form as well as in the previous House and Senate bills is by no means a plan for a complete withdrawal from Iraq.

On the contrary, while fully funding the war, the measure seeks a strategic redeployment of US forces, with tens of thousands of US troops remaining in the occupied country for the purposes of "counterterrorism operations"—suppressing Iraqi resistance—protecting "US interests"—securing oil fields—and training Iraqi puppet forces that have already been implicated in widespread torture and sectarian killings.

Moreover, the Democrats are increasingly posing the issue not as a question of pulling back from the unrestrained militarism with which the Bush administration is identified, but rather an alternative strategy for utilizing US military force to pursue US global interests.

Thus, much of the Democrats' opposition is couched in expressions of concern over the way in which the American armed forces are being worn down by the Iraq deployment and thereby rendered unable to intervene elsewhere in the world. The House-Senate conference committee legislation retains the House version's mandate that military units not be redeployed abroad before they have met the Pentagon's own standards for rest, resupply and retraining. The language allows the President to waive this requirement by asserting that such deployments are necessary for "national security" reasons.

The real content of the Democrats' position was spelled out most clearly in a speech delivered Monday by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

Reid stressed that the Democrats' plan was "a responsible strategically driven redeployment, not a precipitous withdrawal." He added a pledge to continue full funding for the war so long as Bush keeps American forces on the ground in Iraq. "Troops in harm's way will always have the resources to do the mission their leaders ask them."

The Senate Democratic leader acknowledged the "restlessness" of the American public over Iraq, more than five months after an election that represented a popular mandate for an end to the war.

"Many who voted for change in November anticipated dramatic and immediate results in January," he said. "But like it or not, George W. Bush is still commander-in-chief, and this is his war." The Democrats, he suggested, were largely powerless, because, in

the Senate, they hold “a slim majority of 51 in a body that requires 60 to do business.”

This self-serving argument, of course, obscures the fact that with a majority of 51, an opposition party genuinely determined to end the war has the indisputable power to deny funding for US military operations and thereby force a withdrawal. The Democratic leadership has no intention or desire to carry out such an action. It ritualistically invokes the need to “support the troops” as a justification for continuing to pay for a war that is killing those troops at the rate of around 100 a month.

Reid went on to suggest that one of the principal problems posed by the Iraqi occupation was that it was tying down far too much of the American armed forces, under conditions in which he and other Democrats believe that military power should be used elsewhere to assert the interests of the US banks and corporations.

“As our troops carry that burden, our nation’s ability to meet other challenges and face down other foes is being dangerously eroded,” he declared. “We should be addressing a nuclear Iran. And we should be addressing the resurgence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. And we should be addressing the instability and genocide in Africa. And we should be addressing democratic retrenchment in Russia. And we should be addressing anti-Americanism in Latin America.”

In other words, the Democratic plan for “redeployment” is in large measure a preparation for future American wars all over the globe.

The Democratic strategy, Reid continued, “transitions the US mission away from policing a civil war—to training Iraqi security forces, protecting US forces and conducting targeted counter-terror operations.” Such an approach, he claimed, “is aligned with US strategic interests, while at the same time reducing our combat footprint.”

In other words, the Democratic proposal for a “phased redeployment” is aimed not at ending the Iraq war and occupation, but continuing them under conditions more advantageous to Washington.

The plan, Reid added, “allows some of our forces to be moved to other areas of the world where they are needed, such as Afghanistan.”

This support for global militarism by the Democratic Party was underscored in a speech delivered Monday in Chicago by Illinois Senator and presidential candidate Barak Obama. Touted as the “anti-war” alternative to New York Senator Hillary Clinton, Obama included in his call for Washington to reassert its “claim of leadership in world affairs,” a proposal for a major buildup of the US military, including the recruitment of an additional 65,000 soldiers for the Army and 27,000 more Marines.

Against the backdrop of the mass media’s incessant reports about a looming “showdown” and “confrontation” between the Democratic-led Congress and the White House, Reid peppered his speech with calls for “accommodation,” “compromise” and “bipartisanship” in relation to the Iraq war.

These pledges of compromise were spelled out even more explicitly by other Democratic Congressional leaders, who tended to confirm Vice President Cheney’s prediction that the Democrats would cave in to the Bush administration’s intransigence on the

war funding legislation.

“The president has indicated he intends to veto this legislation. I wish that that were not so,” said Congressman David Obey, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee Monday. “But if it is, the best thing that we can do ... is to get this to the president as quickly as possible, so that he can take whatever action he deems necessary so that we can again get about the business of compromising.”

One alternative under consideration by the Democratic Congressional leadership is passing a short-term supplemental appropriations bill, with no withdrawal proposals, thereby compelling the administration to renew its funding appeal in a few months.

Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska, a right-wing Democrat who voted against an initial bill presented in the Senate attaching timetables to the funding and for the final version that narrowly passed the body, was even more cynical in his approach.

“This will work for now,” he said of the House-Senate conference legislation. “When you know the next three chess moves, you go ahead and play.”

This succinctly sums up the character of the supposed opposition of the Democratic congressional leadership to the Iraq war. In the end, they all know that they will provide the money that will keep the war going and drive up a death toll that includes hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and now stands at 3,333 US military personnel.

The “chess game” that the Democrats are playing is designed, on the one hand, to redirect what is seen by wide sections of the American ruling elite as a failed strategy in Iraq in order to continue pursuing US interests by military means both there and internationally.

On the other hand, it is meant to contain the mass and growing popular opposition to the war by promoting illusions that the carnage can be ended by supporting a party that is in reality determined to see this war drag on and is already preparing fresh acts of US aggression in every part of the globe.



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