

# Bush, Democrats meet on war funding as violence soars in Iraq

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US President George W. Bush and Democratic congressional leaders staged a meeting in the White House Wednesday to discuss pending legislation that would provide more than \$100 billion to continue and escalate the four-year-old US war and occupation in Iraq.

The gathering took place against the backdrop of a bloody eruption of violence in Iraq. A series of mass killings in and around Baghdad made a mockery of Washington's claims that the "surge" of additional US troops into the Iraqi capital that began nine weeks ago is creating greater peace and security.

According to the Associated Press, 233 people were killed Wednesday throughout Iraq, making it the second deadliest day since the news agency began keeping a tally of the dead two years ago. Iraqi police said that 191 people were killed in Baghdad alone. The Sadriyah marketplace in the center of Baghdad, a predominantly Shia area, was the scene of the most horrific of the bombings, which claimed 140 lives, while wounding 150 others, making it the deadliest such attack since the US invasion of March 2003. Angry crowds at the scene denounced the Iraqi government and the US occupation as those responsible for the carnage.

Meanwhile, the death toll among US troops—now standing at 3,312—has risen dramatically, with little notice, much less alarm, expressed within the US media. April is shaping up to be one of the bloodiest months since the war began, with 65 soldiers and marines killed so far. Since the surge began in February, 226 American troops have died, while the toll for the past six months stands at 535, the largest for any half-year period since the war began.

The White House meeting, which was hosted by Bush, flanked by Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, represented part of a protracted piece of political theater that appears likely to continue for another few weeks before the war funding bill is finally approved.

Bush began the meeting with a ritualistic statement about Democrats and Republicans alike sending "our prayers to the families of the victims" of the massacre at Virginia Tech. No such expressions of concern were voiced, however, for the seven times as many people killed under the US occupation in the hours before the meeting began.

Predicting a "good discussion," with the Democrats, Bush acknowledged that there were "strong opinions" on both sides, but added, "The whole objective is to figure out how best to get our troops funded, get the money they need to do the job that I've asked them to do."

To no one's surprise, the meeting produced no substantive agreement. Bush had made it explicit from the outset that he had no intention of negotiating with the Democratic congressional leadership, and that he intends to veto any legislation that attaches timetables for troop withdrawals to the war funding.

Addressing the media outside the White House, Senate Majority Leader Reid urged Bush to "search his soul" over the legislation, while insisting: "It gives the troops more than he's asked for and leaves the troops there for considerable periods of time with some goals and benchmarks that have been called for by the American people, the Iraq Study Group and many, many military."

For her part, House Speaker Pelosi indicated that she expects the two chambers to iron out differences between House and Senate versions of the funding bill and pass joint legislation by next week. "We cannot give the president a blank check," she said, but quickly added a conciliatory note: "We left the room with the president understanding that we came in friendship. We respect his role. We wanted him to respect ours."

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (Republican, Kentucky) gave a concise assessment of the way in which the supposed "confrontation" between the Republican White House and the Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill will play out. "The other side pretty much conceded that we need to get funds to the troops," McConnell said. "The bill is going to be vetoed. Then we have to get serious about funding the troops without a withdrawal date."

White House spokeswoman Dana Perino echoed this view after the meeting, asserting that the discussion confirmed that the Democrats will capitulate. "It was clear that ultimately there will be a bill that can fund the troops, that the troops will get the funds they need," she said.

The House and Senate approved separate bills, both of which provide more war funding than the White House had requested. Both also, however, include language suggesting timetables for

withdrawing US “combat troops” from Iraq—a term used to obscure the fact that the Democratic leadership envisions tens of thousands of US military personnel remaining in the occupied country for the purposes of “counterterrorism” operations, training Iraqi puppet forces and protecting US assets and interests, with strategic oil resources undoubtedly at the top of the list.

The House version calls for the partial withdrawal to be effected by August 31, 2008, while the Senate bill proposes that the drawing down of forces begin within four months of the legislation’s passage and be completed by March 31, 2008. The Senate version expressly states that the deadline represents merely a “goal.”

The web site CQ.com, published by the *Congressional Quarterly*, cited House aides as saying that Pelosi spelled out the path that the Democratic leadership will take during meetings Tuesday with her key advisors and the Out of Iraq Caucus.

The joint legislation that will be sent to the White House will include the Senate’s nonbinding “goal” while retaining House language requiring that the Pentagon observe its own standards relating to length of tours and periods of rest, recuperation and retraining between overseas deployments. This mandate, however, includes a loophole allowing the president to obtain a waiver of the requirements merely by invoking grounds of national security. Already, the Pentagon has scrapped its 12-month limit on deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, lengthening them for all US troops there now and all that will be sent in the future to 15 months.

“Pelosi refused to characterize the House as backing down from Democratic leaders’ pledge to end the war,” the congressional publication reported.

Of course, this is precisely what the Democratic leadership is doing, as was evident from the outset of its supposed challenge to the Bush administration over the war.

In her statement outside the White House, Pelosi signaled where the Democrats are going, protesting that “Legislation that we want to present to the president is already a compromise, because it contains his own benchmarks for progress in Iraq. It contains his Defense Department’s own guidelines.... And yet, the president wants to reject them.”

In the end, a “compromise” will likely be reached on the basis of providing all the funding and more that Bush requested for his escalation of the war, while merely reasserting so-called “benchmarks” enunciated by Bush himself, demanding that the Iraqi regime fulfill requirements imposed by Washington.

First and foremost among these, as far as both Democrats and Republicans are concerned, is the enactment of a new petroleum law, which would open up the Iraqi oil fields for exploitation on terms more lucrative than anything seen by the US-based energy monopolies since the days of colonialism.

Meanwhile, a series of new polls released this week have provided fresh indications that the profound opposition to the

war among the broad masses of the American people has only increased as Bush has sought to escalate it and the Democrats carry out their protracted capitulation to the White House.

A new ABC-*Washington Post* poll found that 66 percent of the American public now believes that the war was not worth fighting and that 51 percent—for the first time a majority—believes that the US will ultimately lose the war.

A CNN/Opinion Research poll released Wednesday found that fewer than one third of the population support the war, while two thirds oppose it.

Asked what Congress should do if Bush vetoes the congressional war funding legislation, 35 percent of those who responded voiced support for a new bill that would mandate an immediate withdrawal of all US forces, while 26 percent expressed support for a measure requiring a pullout by next March. Only 37 percent indicated support for the “clean” bill that Bush is demanding to keep US occupation forces in place indefinitely.

In summing up the poll, CNN reported that “support for the war in Iraq remains low amid widespread feelings that the war is going badly and that sending additional troops to Iraq won’t make any difference.”

This mass and growing popular sentiment against the war finds no genuine expression within the ostensible political opposition to the Bush administration, the Democratic Party.

Having won control of Congress thanks to the antiwar sentiments of millions of Americans, the Democratic Party has explicitly ruled out cutting off funding for the repressive US military operations in Iraq. While going through the motions of proposing “goals” for partial withdrawal of troops and standards for their deployment, the Democrats have fully embraced the position of the Republican right that funding a war that claims the lives of nearly 100 American soldiers—and uncounted thousands of Iraqis—every month is a necessary means of realizing the cynical shibboleth of “support our troops.”

Though bitterly divided on tactics, both major parties are agreed that the occupation of Iraq and the aims underlying the US war—seizure of oil wealth and assertion of US hegemony—were legitimate and necessary.



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