

After Bush veto, Democrats prepare further retreat on war funding bill

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President Bush and the Congressional Democratic leaders met Wednesday to initiate negotiations on a new draft of legislation to fund the Iraq war. The talks followed Bush's veto Tuesday of a \$124 billion military spending bill that included language proposing a phased and partial pullout of US troops from the occupied country.

While insisting that they would continue a fight for a timetable for reducing the number of occupation troops currently in Iraq, Democratic leaders made it clear that they would bow to Bush's intransigent opposition to any restrictions on his control of military operations and approve the money to pay for the continuation and escalation of the war.

The formal talks between Bush and the House and Senate Democratic leaders came after the Democrats failed to muster anywhere near the two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives to override the presidential veto. The House voted 221-203 to override, with two Republicans joining the Democrats and seven Democrats siding with the president. Ohio Democrat Dennis Kucinich, who opposed any funding for the war, voted present.

The Senate Democrats did not even bother trying to override the veto, after the failure in the House. A Senate vote would have closely tracked the 51-46 margin by which the bill passed originally, far below the 67 votes required for a two-thirds majority.

Following the vote, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid joined Republican congressional leaders at a brief and largely ceremonial White House meeting with Bush.

Bush voiced optimism that the two sides could "work together to find common ground."

"We had a very positive meeting with President Bush," declared Pelosi afterwards. "But make no mistake: Democrats are committed to ending the war, and we hope to do so in unison with the president of the United States."

Pelosi had ample reason to believe that the public might be skeptical about the Democrats' commitment to ending the war—or that such a thing could be accomplished "in unison" with Bush.

The Democratic leaders have signaled that they will remove even the toothless language that was included in the vetoed legislation, calling for a withdrawal timetable. These provisions—calling for a troop "redeployment" to begin as early as July and be completed by March 2008—were not binding, but

merely a stated goal. Moreover, the proposal was not for an end to the US occupation, but rather its strategic reorientation, with US "combat troops," withdrawn, but tens of thousands of soldiers and Marines left in Iraq for purposes of protecting US interests and facilities, training Iraqi puppet forces and conducting "counterterrorism" operations.

Now, various alternatives have been floated. Among them is one put forward by Representative John Murtha (Democrat of Pennsylvania), who called for Congress to approve only two months' worth of funding, thereby forcing the administration to come back for more money this summer. This option is reportedly opposed by both House leaders and leading Democrats in the Senate.

Presidential hopeful and former senator John Edwards put forward his own proposal in a campaign commercial, calling on Congress to send Bush "the same bill again and again." Edwards, who voted for the war in 2002 and supported it as a candidate for vice president in 2004, is now attempting to pick up votes by posing as an antiwar candidate and contrasting his stand to that of his principal rivals who remain in the Senate—Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Senate Majority Leader Reid expressed irritation at Edwards's demagoguery, declaring, "He's not in the Senate; I am ... He doesn't have to cast votes here in the Senate; we do."

Senator Russell Feingold (Democrat of Wisconsin), has meanwhile submitted legislation to cut off war funding on March 31, 2008. The legislation was co-sponsored by Reid based on the understanding that it is a protest measure that has no chance of passing, much less surviving a presidential veto. Significantly, however, even Feingold's "antiwar" measure includes similar language as the vetoed war funding bill, allowing tens of thousands of troops to remain in Iraq for the same specified purposes.

The consensus position within the Democratic congressional leadership appears to be passing a new bill without timetables, but with "benchmarks," demanding policy changes by the US-backed Iraqi government.

The vetoed legislation included these conditions—virtually all of which were borrowed either from the speech given by Bush in January announcing the troop "surge" or from the report issued last December by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group.

Key among these demands is that the Iraqi parliament approve a new law governing the exploitation of the country's massive oil reserves. While lawmakers stress this measure as a supposed basis

for overcoming sectarian divisions through a revenue-sharing scheme, the law would not incidentally also clear the way for US-based energy conglomerates to reap a bonanza in profits. Draft legislation submitted to the Iraqi parliament contains terms more favorable for foreign corporations than anything presently existing in the Middle East or almost anywhere else in the world.

Other “benchmarks” demand that the Iraqi government give US occupation troops and Iraqi puppet forces unlimited authority to pursue all “extremists,” including Shia militia groups that are aligned with the ruling coalition of Prime Minister Nouri Maliki.

In addition, the bill demanded that the Maliki government establish “political, media, economic, and service committees in support of the Baghdad Security Plan,” promoting the very “surge” that the Democrats went on record to oppose.

The position of the Democratic congressional leadership was most bluntly expressed by House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (Democrat, Maryland). “I don’t think it is a question of backing down. It’s a question of recognizing reality,” Hoyer told CNN in explaining the obvious retreat by the Democrats in the face of Bush’s veto. “We’ve indicated we want to fund the troops,” the majority leader added. He said that Democrats would now focus on legislation that would mandate “responsibility and accountability” by the Iraqi government, rather than seeking a timeline for the withdrawal of American troops. He predicted that Congress would pass such a bill before it goes on its Memorial Day recess at the end of this month.

The only question appears to be whether the Democrats will attempt to insert provisions that would penalize the Iraqi government with the cutoff of funding—for non-military purposes only—if it fails to jump through the hoops designed in Washington. Another option under consideration would merely require the administration and US military commanders to file more frequent reports with Congress if the benchmarks are not met.

The isolated and unstable regime led by Maliki in Baghdad has in the past bristled at the talk of “benchmarks,” insisting, with reason, that the imposition of such policies by Washington only exposes Iraq’s lack of any genuine sovereignty.

Nonetheless, the benchmark approach has the added advantage of enjoying support among what appears to be a significant section of the Republican minority in Congress.

Republican “moderates” like Maine’s senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins have already spoken out in support of including such demands upon the Iraqi regime in the legislation. More significantly, Senator John Warner (Republican of Virginia), the former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that he was working on compromise legislation that would include the benchmarks.

“I’m optimistic that something can be worked out ... that we can achieve a document that will get 70 votes,” Warner said, referring to the number of votes—achievable only by winning nearly half of the Republican caucus—needed to override a presidential veto.

Such comments are indicative of the anxiety within the Republican Party over the Bush administration’s Iraq policy and a desire, particularly among those legislators facing reelection next year, to find some safe means of distancing themselves, even if only slightly, from the overwhelmingly unpopular war policy of

the White House.

Cynically shifting the blame for the historic catastrophe and bloodbath the US war and occupation has inflicted upon Iraq onto the largely powerless regime in Baghdad provides, in their view, such a safe political vehicle.

Representative of the debate going on behind the hollow “antiwar” rhetoric of the Democrats and the attempt by the White House to cast the debacle in Iraq as a decisive battle against Al Qaeda, the *Washington Post* Thursday published an editorial expressing satisfaction at the defeat of the legislation that included withdrawal timetables and backing a new bill that would include benchmarks.

“But Democrats and some Republicans want to press the Iraqi government to take the missing steps toward political conciliation by writing those steps into the legislation and providing for punishment—in the form of cuts in nonmilitary aid to the Iraqi government—if they are not taken,” the *Post* declares, adding that Bush should accept such a proposal, including the punitive sanctions.

The newspaper, which has a long history of promoting and defending the war, adds that the Iraqi regime may prove incapable of meeting Washington’s demands and overcoming Iraq’s sectarian divisions. “If so, the United States will have to stop trying to force an early settlement and shift to a longer-term strategy with a lower military commitment,” the *Post* concludes.

The statement accurately and concisely sums up the real content of the ongoing debate in Washington. What the Democrats are advocating is not an end to the war, but rather this “longer-term strategy with a lower military commitment,” withdrawing US troops from policing Iraqi cities, allowing the sectarian civil war to follow its own course and using more limited US military power to pursue the essential interests of US imperialism in Iraq, most importantly, the effective control of the country’s oil resources.



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