

Prelude to deal with Bush on war-funding

More antiwar posturing from Senate Democrats

Tom Carter
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Legislation introduced by Russ Feingold in the US Senate Wednesday calling for the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq by the end of March, 2008 was the occasion for a new round of phony antiwar posturing by Democratic presidential hopefuls. The legislation was defeated by a wide margin, with nearly half of the Democratic senators voting against it.

Behind a smokescreen of toothless antiwar measures introduced to provide themselves with political cover, Democrats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate are preparing to vote overwhelmingly to continue the war in the form of a war-funding bill they hope to have on President Bush's desk by Memorial Day (May 28).

House Democrats last week passed a bill to fund the war for the next two months and then revisit the issue in July, linking the funds to assurances from the Bush administration that the Iraqi government has met certain "benchmarks" to open up Iraqi oil resources to US exploitation, ensure a measure of political stability and suppress anti-American militia groups. They voted with the foreknowledge that Bush would veto such a measure, and that the Democratic-controlled Senate would, in any case, refuse to pass such a partial funding bill.

Most House Democrats, like their Senate counterparts, joined with Republicans to vote down a separate proposal to set a deadline for the withdrawal of combat troops.

Against the backdrop of ever-rising popular opposition to the war and many indications that Bush's "surge" of US troops in Baghdad is proving a military and political failure, candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination are anxious to give themselves

an antiwar gloss.

Yesterday's grandstanding centered around an amendment proposed by Feingold, a Democrat from Wisconsin, to an unrelated \$14 billion water projects bill. The amendment itself, couched in the language of "supporting the troops," essentially mandated a tactical redeployment of US forces in Iraq to focus primarily on "counter-terrorism," training of Iraqi forces and protection of US assets and personnel. Far from a proposal to withdraw all US forces and end the American military violence against the Iraqi people, it would have authorized the continued presence of tens of thousands of troops after the March 31, 2008 "deadline."

The amendment was nonetheless characterized by congressional supporters and opponents alike and by the media as a move to end the war. It was supported by Democratic presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton of New York, Barack Obama of Illinois, Chris Dodd of Connecticut, and Joe Biden of Delaware.

While 60 votes out of 100 were required to bring the amendment to a discussion and vote, the amendment received only 29. No Republicans voted to support the measure.

Many of the 19 Democrats who opposed the amendment repeated the mantra that any cutoff of funding would "endanger the troops."

"We're going to support those troops," insisted Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who voted against the amendment.

Democratic Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska offered the most bewildering explanation for his vote against the amendment. "I can't see setting dates of

withdrawal or consequences if you don't see the report card first," he said. This in the fifth year of the war!

Senator Obama characterized his vote in favor of the amendment as "a strong statement to the Iraqi government, the president and my Republican colleagues that it's long past time to change course." Clinton, for her part, insisted that "we, as a united party, must work together with clarity of purpose and mission to begin bringing our troops home and end this war."

Dodd has been broadcasting advertisements since Tuesday drawing attention to his support for the Feingold amendment, which he falsely characterizes as a means by which the war can be ended.

Behind the scenes, negotiations are proceeding with the Bush White House to strike a compromise, in all likelihood including some unenforceable "benchmarks," that Congress will pass and Bush will sign.

The *New York Times* came close to admitting as much yesterday, commenting that with the Feingold amendment, "Democrats can vent their frustration with Iraq policy, then proceed to efforts to find a compromise with the White House over war spending."

The real purpose of publicity stunts such as the one staged yesterday is to dupe ordinary Americans who oppose the war into supporting the Democratic Party, which has been thoroughly complicit in the launching and prosecution of the war and will carry on the war even should it take control of the White House in 2008.

Levin and Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid drew up a separate bill yesterday, also in the form of an amendment to the water projects bill, which would grant Bush his full war-funding request while mandating that US combat troops begin to withdraw by October 1 of this year and complete their pullout by March 31 of next year. However, these deadlines would be mere window dressing, because the measure provided that they be waived if Bush provided evidence of "progress."

Levin and Reid withdrew this amendment after the White House told Levin that any resulting legislation would be vetoed.

The Bush administration has categorically pledged to veto any legislation that in any way restricts its ability to continue and escalate the war. In a Fox News interview from Jordan on Tuesday, Vice President

Cheney all but accused congressional Democrats supporting legislation such as Feingold's of treasonous support for terrorists. "So if you're going to be a public official advocating withdrawal from Iraq," Cheney said, "you, in fact, are also saying that what you're recommending is validating the Al Qaeda strategy."

Meanwhile, a section of Senate Republicans, facing the prospect of an electoral rout in 2008, engaged in some posturing of their own. Another water bill amendment introduced by Republican John Warner of Virginia threatened to cut off billions of dollars in US aid to Iraq should the Iraqi regime fail to show "satisfactory progress."

The central fact of American political life is that the massive antiwar sentiment of the population finds no realization in the policies of the government or either of the two parties. Despite factional disagreements over tactics, there is an overwhelming consensus within the ruling establishment that the war will be continued, regardless of the desires of the population.



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