Democrats drop “withdrawal” deadlines as administration mulls post-surge Iraq

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With just days left until Congress goes into its Memorial Day recess, the Democratic leadership has reportedly dropped any proposal for a timeline for partial withdrawal of US troops from Iraq as part of a new war-funding bill.

The Democrats’ abandonment of this principal prop in their antiwar charade comes as the Bush administration is reported to be in discussions on what shape US policy will take in the aftermath of the present military “surge” that has poured tens of thousands of more American combat troops into Baghdad and Anbar province.

Behind the media reports of a showdown between Democrats and Republicans over the Iraq war, what in reality appears to be emerging in Washington is a bipartisan consensus on a strategy that would continue the US occupation of the oil-rich country for many years to come.

In an attempt to give Bush a bill that he is prepared to sign before the Memorial Day weekend, “Democratic leaders have decided to drop their insistence on a timeline for withdrawing US forces from Iraq,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported Tuesday.

CNN cited two Democratic leadership aides as telling the cable network that “Congressional Democrats plan to send to President Bush a war-spending bill without a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq.”

Both reports indicated that the Democratic congressional leaders would attempt to attach a hike in the minimum wage—the first in more than a decade—to the bill. This unrelated measure is being introduced in an effort to divert public attention from the fact that the so-called opposition party is providing Bush with nearly $100 billion to continue the Iraq war, giving the administration precisely the “blank check” the Democrats claimed to oppose.

The inevitable Democratic climb-down follows a series of war-funding votes in Congress. The first were held last month, with the House and Senate passing bills that were joined into a measure that fully funded the war and its escalation, while proposing a non-binding timetable for withdrawing some—but by no means all—of the US occupation troops. Bush vetoed this measure, insisting that he would not accept any such conditions on the funding.

Then, the Senate Democrats went through the motions of voting on the resolution advanced by Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin that set a March deadline for cutting off funding for the deployment of US “combat troops” in Iraq. In this bill, as in all of the Democratic-sponsored legislation, “combat troops” is used as a term of art to mask the fact that the proposals call for US military personnel to remain in Iraq indefinitely for purposes defined as training the Iraqi military, protecting US assets and citizens and conducting “counterterrorism” operations. In other words, the occupation would continue, albeit in an altered form, with tens of thousands of American troops remaining.

This measure—designed to allow Democrats to adopt a phony antiwar posture one more time—was defeated by a vote of 67 to 29, with 19 Democrats and Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Connecticut “independent” who is a member of the Democratic caucus, voting with the Republicans against it.

Then, last Thursday, the Senate voted 94 to 1 for a “support the troops” resolution that amounted to putting the body on record as guaranteeing the US military full funding “to complete their assigned or future missions.” The measure essentially announced that the debate was over, and Senate and House leaders would work behind closed doors with White House negotiators to craft a war-funding bill acceptable to Bush.

This final version is expected to include so-called benchmarks for the Iraqi government, possibly with the threat that non-military funding will be cut off if it fails to achieve these goals set in Washington. Both the White House and the Republican minority leadership in Congress have indicated that they could accept this approach.

Typical was the response of Representative Roy Blunt of Missouri, the second-ranking Republican in the House of Representatives, who declared, “I’m fine with economic and political consequences” for the Iraqi government.

It appears likely that the Democrats will ultimately settle on something very similar to the proposal advanced by Republican Senator John Warner of Virginia, who called for the Bush administration to submit reports in July and September on the Iraqi government’s progress in achieving the benchmarks, with the prospect of withholding reconstruction aid if it failed to do so. Warner’s proposal would allow the White House to waive the punitive aid cutoff of it saw fit.

This is an utterly cynical exercise, given the fact that the Iraqi regime is a virtually powerless puppet of the US occupation itself, exerting control nowhere outside of its Green Zone offices in Baghdad, which are increasingly targeted for insurgent attacks.

The principal benchmark that is invoked by politicians of both parties is the Iraqi parliament’s passage of a draft oil law. While this legislation is presented as an essential step in ensuring the fair distribution of the country’s oil wealth among different ethno-religious groups, it is, in fact, aimed principally at clearing the way

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for US-based energy conglomerates to exploit Iraqi oil reserves on extraordinarily profitable terms.

In an analysis of this premier "benchmark" last week, the *Christian Science Monitor* cited reports that "the draft law in fact says little about sharing oil revenues among Iraqi groups and a lot about setting up a framework for investment that may be disadvantageous to Iraqis over the long term."

The congressional focus on the oil law has drawn sharp criticism from within Iraq, the newspaper noted. "The US talks about the sovereignty of Iraq, but why are they getting involved in this oil law?" Mohammed al-Dynee, member of the Iraqi parliament representing the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue said.

In an open letter to the US Congress, Hasan Jum'a Awwad, head of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions, expressed a similar view. "We see no good reason for linking the passing of the feeble Iraqi oil law to the withdrawal of the occupation troops from Iraq," he wrote. "Everyone knows that the oil law does not serve the Iraqi people, and that it serves Bush, his supporters and the foreign companies at the expense of the Iraqi people who have been wronged and deprived of their right to their oil despite enduring all difficulties."

It was the Democrats' presidential front-runner Senator Hillary Clinton of New York who commented in relation to the debate between the Democrats and the White House on the Iraq war that "whatever our differences over the means, we are all agreed on the end."

The persistent focus on the oil law by both Congress and the White House bears this assertion out in the most concrete terms.

Moreover, there are indications that the strictly limited and tactical disagreements over means may yet be overcome as well. In a column published Tuesday entitled "After the surge," the *Washington Post's* foreign affairs columnist David Ignatius reported, "President Bush and his senior military and foreign policy advisers are beginning to discuss a 'post-surge' strategy for Iraq that they hope could gain bipartisan political support."

Citing senior administration officials, Ignatius writes that the plan is "focused on elements that Democrats say they would continue to support, such as training the Iraqi military and hunting al-Qaeda, even as they set a timetable for withdrawing combat forces."

The "policy ideas under discussion," he continues, include plans to "train Iraqi security forces," "Provide 'force protection' for US troops who remain in Iraq" and "Continue Special Forces operations against al-Qaeda," as well as against "Iranian-backed sectarian militias."

These proposals virtually reproduce language that has been included in the Democratic war-funding bills, outlining what operations would be allowed to continue despite the withdrawal of US "combat troops."

Ignatius makes it clear that this proposal is predicated on an acknowledgment that the US cannot halt the sectarian violence in Iraq and should stop trying, concentrating instead on preserving its essential strategic interests. He quotes official sources as stating that there is a "growing recognition in Baghdad ... that the United States lacks a strong local partner because of the weakness and sectarian base of the Maliki government."

The *Post* columnist also points to a recent meeting of "top counterinsurgency experts" convened by the senior US commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, to consider similar issues.

There is no reason to believe that such a reconfiguration of the US occupation—cynically packaged as a "troop withdrawal" by the Democratic leadership—would be any less bloody than the current US military operations in Iraq. Reduced numbers of US troops would no doubt rely more on air strikes and attacks by Special Forces to suppress continued resistance from the Iraqi people, while training puppet forces to carry out mass killing.

Nor is there any reason to believe that this new strategy has any greater chance than the current "surge" of extricating Washington from the insoluble contradictions that beset its Iraq policy. Every poll indicates that Iraqi opposition to continued US military occupation—and support for armed attacks on American troops—is steadily growing.

The surge itself represents a desperate attempt to drown this opposition in blood. US military violence in the occupied country appears likely to escalate sharply in the coming months. A report carried by the Hearst Newspapers Tuesday indicated that "The Bush administration is quietly on track to nearly double the number of combat troops in Iraq this year," by sending in more combat brigades and extending the tours of those already there.

According to this report, the number of combat soldiers would rise from the 52,500 that were there in early January to as many as 98,000 by December. The total number of US troops—including support units—could hit a record 200,000.

A Pentagon spokesman denied that the administration was carrying out "a secret surge," but the overlapping of deployments provides an opportunity to unleash unprecedented military violence against the Iraqi people.

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