

As Congress reconvenes

Democrats unveil new plan to “shift mission” in Iraq

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With Congress reconvening after its July 4 recess, Democratic leaders unveiled a new strategy to reconfigure the US intervention in Iraq by withdrawing substantial numbers of American troops, while leaving tens of thousands behind to secure Washington’s strategic interests in the region.

The centerpiece of this latest legislative face-off between the Democratic-led Congress and the Bush White House is the debate on the Defense Department budget for fiscal year 2008, which provides a total of \$648.8 billion for the US war machine, including another \$142 billion for the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Much as with the “emergency” war funding bill that Congress passed last May, providing \$100 billion to continue and escalate the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Democratic leadership has no intention of utilizing Congressional power to cut off the money that pays for these operations, but rather will seek to attach amendments to the Pentagon appropriations bill that restrict US troop deployments and push for a timetable for a partial withdrawal.

In the last confrontation, the Democrats ended up bowing to White House intransigence and passed the war funding measure, no strings attached. Now, the Democratic leadership is returning to the same debate, under conditions in which a number of prominent Senate Republicans—Richard Lugar of Indiana, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as well as George Voinovich of Ohio and Pete Domenici of New Mexico—have distanced themselves from the White House and publicly called for a change in course in Iraq, including a drawdown of US combat forces.

Olympia Snowe, the Republican senator from Maine, indicated Monday that she was prepared to support legislation setting a timeline for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq. Waiting, she said, would “run the risk of losing another precious month with precious lives.”

Speaking at a Capitol Hill press conference Monday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada) echoed the argument made by Lugar and other Republicans that a shift in US strategy in Iraq cannot wait until September. It is then that the top American military commander in the occupied country, Gen. David Petraeus, together with the US ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, are scheduled to deliver a progress report on the so-called surge that has sent an additional 30,000 US troops into Iraq. For its part, the White House and supporters of its war strategy have attempted to play down the significance of the September report, insisting that pacification of Iraq will take considerably longer.

“The war is headed in a dangerous direction, and Americans are united in the belief that we cannot wait until the administration’s

September report before we change course in Iraq,” said Reid. “Attacks on US forces are up, Iraqi political leaders are frozen in a dangerous stalemate and a change at every front is required if we are to succeed. We cannot ask our military to continue to fight without a strategy for success, and we certainly cannot ask them to fight before they are ready to do so.”

The last phrase was made in reference to legislation sponsored by Senator Jim Webb, the freshman Democratic senator from Virginia, who previously served as an assistant secretary of defense and secretary of the Navy in the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan.

Webb, who appeared with Reid at the news conference, has introduced a bill that sets minimum lengths of “dwell time”—periods troops are stationed at their home bases—between deployments to the war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. For active-duty troops, the legislation would mandate one month at home for every month deployed, while for reservists it would mandate that three times the length of a deployment be spent off active duty.

Currently, Iraq deployments have been extended to at least 15 months, while troops receive at most 12 months at home between deployments.

The legislation, the first amendment to be promoted by the Democratic leadership, is being pitched as a “support the troops” measure aimed not so much at ending the war as saving the US military from being broken by the debacle in Iraq.

“This amendment will help us strengthen our military,” Reid told the press conference, adding, in apparent reference to the Virginia senator’s military and Republican background, “There’s no better person in the entire Congress to do this than Jim Webb.”

For his part, Webb insisted that the legislation was necessary, no matter what course the Iraq war may take, in order to protect the military. “The time has come for the Congress to place reasonable restrictions on how America’s finest men and women are being used.”

The impact of the back-to-back deployments—as well as that of mounting popular opposition to the war—has found its expression in a deepening military recruitment crisis. The Army acknowledged Monday that it missed its recruitment target for the second month in a row. Military officials revealed that the Army fell some 15 percent short of its June goal of 8,400 new recruits.

Webb went on to cast the extended deployment of over 150,000 American troops in Iraq as an impediment to the pursuit of US strategic interests elsewhere, declaring that Washington had become “so obsessed with the Iraq situation that it is not able to address other

problems around the world.”

Reid said that in the coming weeks of debate on the defense spending bill, the Democratic leadership will also introduce an amendment sponsored by Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin (Democrat-Michigan) that would require the beginning of a drawdown of US troops from Iraq within 120 days, with most of them to be removed from the country by April 2008.

While Reid urged Republican support for these measures, even those Republicans who have spoken out against the White House strategy signaled that they are not preparing to rally behind the Democratic proposals.

Senator Lugar, for example, described the Levin amendment’s timetable as “far too inflexible.” In an interview on CNN news Sunday, he added that “we really have to be thoughtful as to physically how our troops could get out of Iraq.”

Meanwhile, Domenici and other Republicans are reportedly preparing to back an amendment sponsored by Senators Ken Salazar (Democrat-Colorado) and Lamar Alexander (Republican-Tennessee), which calls for the implementation of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. Supporters of the measure claim it is aimed at creating the conditions to allow a substantial reduction of US forces in Iraq by next spring, while critics have charged that in reality it would impose no binding conditions on the White House.

The debate is unfolding amid signs of growing divisions and crisis within the Bush administration over the Iraq war. The *New York Times* reported Monday that administration officials have begun debating whether Bush should announce his intention to begin reducing the number of American soldiers in Iraq in order to staunch the hemorrhaging of support for his policy among Congressional Republicans.

ABC News quoted a “senior White House official” as saying that the administration is “in a panic mode” over the Republican defections.

There is mounting concern within the administration, the *Times* noted, that support will further erode as the administration presents its interim report on progress achieved by the surge which is to go to Congress by July 15. Officials acknowledge that the Iraqi regime has failed to make any progress on the so-called benchmarks imposed by Washington. Key among them are achieving a political compromise aimed at quelling sectarian violence and drafting a new oil law that would open the way for US-based energy conglomerates to take control of Iraq’s lucrative oil fields.

The surge has manifestly failed to quell the violence, with a series of bombings and attacks over the weekend claiming the lives of over 220 civilians. US casualties, meanwhile, remain at a record high, with at least 520 American troops having been killed since the Bush administration began its escalation last February.

The crisis atmosphere within the administration was highlighted by the sudden cancellation of a long-planned trip by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates to Central America. He stayed in Washington to participate in high-level talks on the Iraq war. Similarly, last week national security adviser Stephen Hadley was called back from a vacation to participate in these discussions.

In a press briefing Monday, White House spokesman Tony Snow dismissed the growing evidence of the administration’s crisis over the war, claiming that there was no ongoing debate over troop reductions and downplaying the report going to Congress next week as a “snapshot” of the situation in Iraq.

Bombarded with questions about the statements of Lugar and other

leading Republicans that the US cannot wait until September to change course in Iraq, Snow absurdly claimed that there is no real contradiction between their position and that of the White House. “We continue to be committed to letting the surge work,” he said.

Echoing the anti-democratic position spelled out by Bush and Cheney, Snow insisted that the administration would not “withdraw to appease public opinion,” but would determine its policy based on “military necessity.”

Snow went so far as to suggest that the debate in Congress was tied to a “propaganda war” by al-Qaeda designed “to weaken American public opinion, to make it more difficult to wage the war.”

Significantly, General Petraeus, the senior US commander in Iraq, appeared to contradict the White House position, suggesting that a drawdown of troops would prove necessary because of growing tensions over the war.

In an interview with BBC news, Petraeus insisted that suppressing the Iraqi insurgency would prove “a long term endeavor” that could last for decades. At the same time, he added that, while a sustained US presence was necessary, “I think the question is at what level...and really, the question is how can we gradually reduce our forces so we reduce the strain on the army, on the nation and so forth.”

This is in essence the same line being advanced by the Democratic leadership in Congress.

In the question and answer period at the Capitol Hill press conference given by Reid and Webb, the Senate majority leader was asked about the warning made by the foreign minister in the US-backed Iraqi regime, Hoshiyar Zebari, that a rapid withdrawal of US troops could unleash a wider civil war, regional wars and “the collapse of the state.”

“No one is calling for a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq,” Reid replied, “No one.”

The Senate Democratic leader went on to point out that all of the legislation backed by his party calls for American troops to remain in the country indefinitely to “conduct counterterrorism operations, protect our assets and train Iraqi forces.”

He continued by stressing that if the Democratic “antiwar” program is enacted, “We will still have tens of thousands of American troops in Iraq.” Finally, Reid concluded, “The mission needs to change.”

One could not ask for a clearer summation of the Democratic Party’s real position. Having collaborated with the Bush administration in foisting this war on to the American people, it was the undeserving beneficiary of the mass antiwar sentiment that was expressed at the polls in the 2006 midterm elections.

Now in the leadership of both the House and the Senate, the Democrats are not seeking to end the criminal war and colonial-style occupation in Iraq. Rather, their aim is to salvage the strategic interests that were being pursued by US imperialism in launching the war—to begin with by reorganizing the occupation on a more sustainable basis.



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