

# Democrats halt Senate debate on Iraq war

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Senate Democrats abandoned an effort to impose restrictions on the Bush administration's conduct of the war in Iraq after losing a procedural vote Wednesday to halt a Republican filibuster. After 24 hours of desultory debate on Iraq war policy, the Democratic leadership caved in to the White House, effectively conceding that there will be no change in US policy in Iraq for as long as Bush has congressional Republican support to continue the present course.

Just before noon the Senate fell well short of the 60 votes required to force a vote on the plan offered by Democrats Carl Levin of Michigan and Jack Reed of Rhode Island, which would give the Bush administration 120 days to begin withdrawing combat troops from Iraq. The amendment to the defense authorization bill would have set an April 2008 deadline for withdrawal of all combat forces, but allowed tens of thousands of US troops to remain in Iraq indefinitely for the stated purpose of fighting terrorists, training Iraqi troops and protecting US assets.

Only four Republicans joined 48 Democrats and one independent to support the amendment. Majority Leader Harry Reid switched his vote at the last minute in order to preserve his right to seek reconsideration at a later stage, making the final margin 52-47. But minutes after this parliamentary maneuver, Reid announced he was pulling the defense bill from the Senate calendar and would not permit votes on any other amendments related to the Iraq war.

This sudden change of tack—votes on various amendments had been planned, including a measure to require closure of the US concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay—was actually decided upon at a private conclave of Senate Democratic leaders Monday.

According to press reports, the Democrats feared that several more modest war-related measures might pass if they reached the floor for a vote, including a bipartisan measure to adopt the report of the Iraq Study Group as government policy, and an amendment by Republicans Richard Lugar and John Warner requiring Bush to develop operational plans for a draw-down of US troops, while not mandating any actual pullout.

Both amendments would have given Senate Republicans

an opportunity to go on record in a vote against Bush administration policy in an effort to appease public antiwar sentiment, while doing nothing in practice to interfere with the ongoing escalation of the war. By blocking their consideration, Reid was essentially saying that the privilege of offering toothless amendments that do not end the war would be reserved for the Democrats, who need the political cover even more than the Republicans.

One prominent Republican, Senator Lugar, spoke sympathetically of Reid's difficulties. "He recognizes that Iraq is the major issue that brought Democrats into a majority in both houses," Lugar said. "That constituency is unsatisfied and restive, and therefore politically this becomes the top priority by quite a distance."

The additional amendments would also have brought to the surface divisions among the Senate Democrats. The Republican filibuster has obscured those divisions. It is not even certain that the Levin-Reed amendment would have passed if it had come up for a vote, as several Democrats who voted to end the filibuster were not committed to vote for the amendment itself.

One of the Democratic candidates elected in November 2006, Senator Jon Tester of Montana, emphasized that he believed the Senate should neither order removal of all troops nor set policy for the conduct of military operations. He backed a vote on the Levin-Reed amendment more as a symbolic gesture of the need for a change in policy. "It still gives the commander-in-chief the flexibility he needs as commander-in-chief," Tester said.

The Montana senator added, "[T]here was a significant number of troops in the Middle East before we started this thing; there's going to be some troops in the Middle East; there's US interests involved and that's the nature of the beast." Indicating his support for an open-ended US presence in Iraq, he said, "We've been there for four years and I don't think you can anticipate that everybody is going to be out. I don't think that's going to be the case. There'll be some left, as needed."

The decision to end further consideration of war-related legislation, at least until mid-September, means that scores if not hundreds more American soldiers and thousands more

innocent Iraqi civilians will be slaughtered. But Reid was the picture of complacency. “You cannot fight against the future,” he told his Republican counterparts. “Time is on our side.”

Assistant Majority Leader Richard Durbin declared during the debate, “This war was born in deception. At the highest levels of our government, it has been waged with incompetence and arrogance.” These are, however, empty words, given that the Democrats have flatly rejected any effort to remove Bush and Cheney from office.

In a fundamental sense, the entire framework of the Senate debate was a fraud, since Reid, Durbin & Co. have already pushed through the emergency funding bill required by the Bush administration to finance the war through September 30. Pentagon officials had warned that they would be compelled to halt military operations in Iraq for lack of funding, but the House and Senate buckled and passed the appropriations bill with top-heavy bipartisan majorities at the end of May.

The congressional Democrats have thus foresworn both the constitutional method for ending the US occupation of Iraq—using Congress’s “power of the purse” to force a withdrawal of US forces—and the constitutional method for removing those responsible for a criminal and aggressive war, impeachment.

Instead, they have devoted their efforts to a public relations campaign aimed at portraying themselves as opponents of the war while permitting Bush and Cheney to continue it unhindered. This has included such measures as non-binding resolutions, resolutions that will not be brought to a vote (in the Senate), and resolutions that cannot survive a presidential veto (in the House), combined with passage of the bill providing \$100 billion to continue military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In this duplicitous attempt to delude the vast majority of Democratic voters who oppose the war, the congressional Democrats have received political assistance from liberal pressure groups like MoveOn.org and United for Peace and Justice, and publications like the *Nation*, which have portrayed the legislative play-acting as though it were a titanic battle for the soul of the republic.

Tom Matzzie of MoveOn.org hailed Reid’s decision to pull the defense authorization bill from the Senate calendar, declaring, “I think Senator Reid took an important step toward confronting Republican obstructionism and ending the war.” Matzzie told the *Washington Post* that his organization would focus on the 21 Senate Republicans facing reelection next year, with the goal of “forcing the entire Republican Party to look over the side of the cliff” in contemplating the electoral consequences of continued support for the war. “Ultimately, we end the war by creating

a toxic political environment for war supporters like the Republicans in the Senate,” he said.

A similar group, Progressive Democrats of America, admitted in an email to supporters Tuesday, “The Levin-Reed Amendment does not end the occupation and it leaves too many troops and all military contractors behind in Iraq.” Nonetheless, it said that passage of the amendment would be “a good first step” and offered the prospect of further action in the fall when senators would be urged to “step forward to offer an amendment to bring the troops home by the holidays.”

Americans Against Escalation in Iraq, an umbrella for the pro-Democratic Party groups critical of the war—including MoveOn.org, Center for American Progress, the Service Employees International Union, Win Without War, and the Campaign for America’s Future—said it would encourage lobbying to “keep the heat on” the Republican senators who claimed to oppose the White House on Iraq policy.

It was left to the *Nation* magazine to make a bald admission that the antiwar pretense of the Senate Democrats was wearing thin. In a column hailing the beginning of the round-the-clock debate on war policy as a vigorous new effort by the Democratic leadership, the magazine observed that because of the continuation of the war, more than eight months after the Democratic victory in November 2006, there was the danger that “more and more Americans came to see Reid and the Democrats as, at best, ineffective; and, at worst, in unspoken collaboration with Bush.”

This is, in truth, the real state of affairs in official Washington. None of the crimes perpetrated by the Bush administration, whether in Iraq or at home, could have been carried out without that “unspoken”—and frequently overt—collaboration by the Democratic Party.



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