

US Congress reconvenes for phony debate on Iraq war

Bill Van Auken
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The US Congress went back into session Tuesday amid unmistakable signs that, following its summer recess, the Democratic leadership is preparing once again to provide the funding and political support needed to continue the war in Iraq.

At the same time, with an eye to the 2008 national elections, the Democrats will resume their empty war of words over Iraq policy, with the aim of placating and containing the vast antiwar sentiment of the American people.

Ten months after the Democrats were swept into the leadership of both the House of Representatives and the Senate on a wave of popular anger over the war, the debate in Congress has pushed them steadily to the right, to the point where the substantive differences between the two major parties have all but vanished.

Bush's elaborately staged photo opportunity at a massive US airbase in Iraq's Anbar province Monday was designed in no small part to take what little political wind remains out of the Democrats' sails.

After briefings from Gen. David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador in Baghdad, Bush claimed that he was told "that if the kind of success we are now seeing here continues it will be possible to maintain the same level of security with fewer American forces."

In his remarks to a captive audience of US troops, Bush continued: "Those decisions will be based on a calm assessment by our military commanders on the conditions on the ground—not a nervous reaction by Washington politicians to poll results in the media. In other words, when we begin to draw down troops from Iraq, it will be from a position of strength and success, not from a position of fear and failure. To do otherwise would embolden our enemies and make it more likely that they would attack us at home."

This verbal support for a partial withdrawal of American occupation forces in the unspecified future was calculated to further narrow the gap between the administration and the Democratic congressional leadership, which is rapidly moving towards compromise proposals that would amount to little more than the empty pledge given by the president.

The renewal of the debate began Tuesday with the release of a Government Accountability Office report finding that the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has failed to meet 11 of 18 "benchmarks" set by Congress—among them, the enactment of a new hydrocarbons law to open up Iraq's vast oil reserves to exploitation by US-based energy giants, the reduction of sectarian

violence, and the disbursement of some \$10 billion in reconstruction funding.

It is to be followed Thursday with a report from Gen. James L. Jones, the retired Marine commander who headed a congressionally created commission to assess the situation in Iraq.

The main event, however, has been scheduled for September 11, timed for obvious political reasons to coincide with the sixth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. This will be the report delivered by Gen. Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, which will claim significant progress as a result of the "surge" that poured 30,000 more US troops into Iraq and make a case for continuing the escalated intervention. This contention—belied by the rising number of civilian casualties in Iraq—inevitably will be supplemented by a ratcheting up of the White House's crude fear campaign aimed at convincing the public that a withdrawal would lead to "terrorists following us home."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid stated in advance that he and other Democrats will listen to the Petraeus-Crocker testimony with an "open mind." But the general and the ambassador will be tailoring their remarks to fit the strategy laid out by the Bush White House.

Meanwhile, Senator Charles Schumer of New York, the third-ranking Democrat in the Senate and head of the party's senatorial campaign committee signaled the increasing accommodation between the White House and the ostensible opposition party. Schumer cited the recent resignations of Bush adviser Karl Rove and Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, as well as a set of token measures packaged as aid to homeowners facing foreclosure announced by the president last week, as signs that the administration is moving to the left.

"Many of us have been wondering, is the president about to change course, to move to the middle of the road, to work with the Democrats," Schumer said. "This is the first really concrete action we have seen where the president is indeed moving to the middle."

Others have openly gone over to the administration's position, supposedly convinced by the "fact-finding" junkets to Iraq that are carefully orchestrated by the Pentagon. Prominent among them is Representative Brian Baird, a five-term Oregon Democrat who previously voted against the war but now insists that the surge is working and that a hasty withdrawal would be unconscionable.

This shift provoked intense anger last month at meetings Baird held in his district, where hundreds turned out to denounce him

and the war.

One of the most revealing statements came from California Democratic Representative Ellen Tauscher, who chairs the House Armed Forces Committee strategic forces subcommittee. “I don’t think this debate should be about the surge, because, not surprisingly, when you have the finest military force in the world and you add more of them, you get more security where they are,” she said, adding that the increased deployment meant that US troops were not available for other “crises.”

“People will say ... if we lose, then Iran is dangerous, and I don’t dispute that,” Tauscher said. “But is the Bush administration really suggesting that the way to deal with Iran is to be pinned down in Iraq?”

Thus, leading Democrats oppose the beefed-up occupation of Iraq from the standpoint that it may interfere with the preparation of another and even bloodier war against Iran.

Under these conditions, the measures on the war that will be debated are almost farcical. For instance, a proposal by Republican Senator John Warner of Virginia that the administration bring 5,000 troops home by Christmas is being treated as if it represented a significant shift by Republicans against the war that may garner Democratic backing.

Reid and others in the Democratic leadership have signaled that they may be prepared to back measures that only last spring they opposed as too accommodating to the administration. These include calls for a partial withdrawal without the setting of any deadlines for troop redeployment and a largely meaningless bill adopting the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which also opposed such timetables.

Given the tough logistical realities confronting the US military, withdrawals are virtually inevitable once the 15-month tours of duty by the brigades sent in with the surge begin to end next April. At that point, finding replacements will prove impossible, under conditions in which every Army combat unit will either be in Afghanistan or Iraq, preparing to deploy there, or only recently returned.

Sustaining the expanded deployment over a prolonged period would prove possible, according to military manpower experts like former Pentagon assistant secretary Lawrence Korb, only through the revival of the draft. Reinstating military conscription is by no means unthinkable and would become almost inevitable given the launching of a war against Iran.

In the final analysis, the essential policy being promoted by the Democrats and that which is being pursued by the Republican administration are largely in sync. Both envision a continued occupation of Iraq, albeit with a somewhat reduced US military force, over the course of many more years, if not decades.

Every piece of so-called antiwar legislation promoted by the Democratic leadership before its abject capitulation to Bush on war funding last May included stipulations that sufficient numbers of US troops remain in the country to carry out “counter-insurgency” operations against the resistance of the Iraqi people and protect American imperialism’s strategic interests, centered on Iraq’s oil reserves. Reid himself acknowledged that, if enacted, the Democratic-backed legislation would leave “tens of thousands” of American troops occupying Iraq for the foreseeable

future.

Once again, the Democratic leadership can be counted upon to repudiate in practice its verbal pretensions of opposing the war. The Bush administration is reportedly preparing to add \$50 billion more onto yet another supplemental war funding bill that had previously been announced as totaling \$147 billion. When this \$200 billion package comes before Congress, the Democrats will provide the necessary votes to assure its passage, amid hypocritical claims that they have no choice but to “support the troops” and give them everything they need while in harm’s way.

The one means that Congress has to compel an end to the war—the power of the purse—is again being repudiated in advance of any vote. The Democrats refuse to cut off funding not out of any concern for the welfare of American soldiers—who will continue to be killed and maimed in Iraq—but because they, like the Republicans, support the predatory aims for which the war was launched in the first place—control of oil and the seizing of strategic advantage over the economic rivals of American capitalism in Europe and Asia.

The Democrats’ shift to the right runs directly counter to the popular mood, which remains decidedly opposed to a continuation of the war and occupation. Among the more recent polls was one done by CBS News last month, showing 60 percent demanding that troops be withdrawn, 67 percent saying that the war is going badly and—after all of the media propaganda about the supposed “gains” in Iraq—only 29 percent believing that the six-month-old surge has had any positive impact.

It is high time to draw the political lessons of the experience of the 10 months since the 2006 midterm elections. While the Democratic Party was the undeserving beneficiary of the mass antiwar sentiment that dominated that election, it, like the Republicans, is a party that represents America’s financial elite and upholds the economic and geo-strategic interests of US imperialism.

That an election which expressed an overwhelming mandate for an end to the war of aggression has yielded only the escalation of that war and the exclusion of any meaningful congressional opposition to its continuation represents the clearest confirmation that the interests of the masses of working people are incompatible with the two-party system.

Neither Congress nor either of the two parties of big business will end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor will the election of a Democratic president alter the plans of US imperialism to continue its occupation of Iraq and launch new wars of aggression.

Only the independent mobilization of the international working class can bring an end to the war and prevent even more bloody conflagrations. This requires an irrevocable break with the Democratic Party and the building of a new, mass independent party of the working class based upon a program of socialist internationalism.



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