

Democrats pack in their antiwar charade

Bill Van Auken
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Little more than 10 months after winning the leadership of both houses of the US Congress thanks to a swelling tide of opposition to the war in Iraq, the Democratic Party has largely abandoned even the pretense of a struggle to bring the war to an end.

This climb-down comes in the wake of last week's congressional testimony by the senior US commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, and the American ambassador to Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, defending the current surge, followed by President Bush's speech affirming that the beefed-up deployments will continue until next summer, when troop strength will return to the previous 130,000 level and remain there until after he leaves office in 2009.

In response, the Democratic leadership has signaled its intention to put off any consideration or debate on the administration's request for another round of war funding, believed to amount to an additional \$200 billion. The White House is expected to submit the request for the money this week, demanding that it be passed by October 1, the start of the new federal budget year.

The delay will have no impact upon the funding of the war. While the administration's supplemental request is put in abeyance, the Democratic congressional leadership will move ahead with the drafting of a half-trillion-dollar annual Defense Authorization Act, providing the basic budget for the American military. This measure, which covers arms procurement, payrolls, training and other routine costs of maintaining Washington's gargantuan military machine, will include a provision allowing the Pentagon to transfer money between different accounts, thereby providing a backdoor means of continuing to pay for the war and occupation in Iraq.

Democratic leaders in Congress have portrayed the decision to delay any debate on the next round of war funding as a tactical maneuver aimed at lining up more Republican support for an alternative policy in Iraq. As the Associated Press reported, the move is designed to give the Democrats "time to calculate their next move and see if Republican support for [Bush's] policies deteriorates." It added that Democrats acknowledged the delay would provide "breathing space to a party divided on what to do next."

In the meantime, the abortive proposals for withdrawal timetables floated last spring—in the run-up to Congress's approval of \$100 billion to finance the surge—have been placed in mothballs.

Instead, the Democratic leadership is shifting to proposals that only months ago it had rejected as being too conciliatory towards the administration. The debate has been ceded to the so-called "centrists" within the party who are seeking to craft legislation acceptable to Republicans that would continue the occupation

indefinitely, albeit on a somewhat altered basis.

Thus Democratic Senators Ken Salazar of Colorado, Ben Nelson of Nebraska and Max Baucus of Montana, together with Maine Republican Senator Olympia Snowe, having returned from a weekend junket to Iraq, indicated that they would try to craft legislation that would keep US forces in Iraq, but shift them from combat operations to "counterterrorism," the training of Iraqi puppet forces, and the protection of US interests.

"A complete withdrawal would leave chaos in that region and I think would spell problems for us in the future," Senator Nelson told the *New York Times*.

Another major focus of the Democratic-led debate is a proposal drafted by Democratic Senator Jim Webb of Virginia that would require the Pentagon to grant troops deployed to Iraq equal amounts of time at their home bases. Such a rotation would compel the military to make a modest reduction in the Iraqi deployment levels, unless additional National Guard or Reserve units were called up or the military draft reinstated. A vote on the measure is expected this week.

Meanwhile, Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has announced a significant retreat from legislation he advanced last July calling for the withdrawal of all US "combat troops" to begin within 120 days and be completed by April 2008. Levin indicated Monday that he is prepared to join Republicans in backing a measure that would propose withdrawing such troops within nine months, setting this timeframe as a desired goal rather than a legislative mandate. Under both proposals, tens of thousands of "non-combat" troops would remain in Iraq maintaining the occupation and continuing to kill and die in the struggle to suppress Iraqi resistance.

In the House, Democratic representatives John Tanner of Tennessee and Neil Abercrombie of Hawaii have put forward a patently toothless proposal that merely would require Bush to report to Congress on the administration's process of planning for a withdrawal. It would not mandate a withdrawal, or even set any requirements for completing such a plan.

What this retreat makes clear is that the Democratic leadership is altering its position in tandem with the campaign launched by the White House with the orchestrated testimony of Petraeus and Crocker and the stand pat position enunciated by Bush.

This shift stands in stark contrast to popular sentiment, which is even more deeply opposed to the war today than at the time of the midterm elections last November. Indeed, the latest polls conducted in the wake of the administration's propaganda campaign show that attitudes towards the war were virtually

unmoved by the efforts of Bush and Petraeus.

A poll released Tuesday by the Pew Research Center again showed a clear majority—54 percent—supporting the withdrawal of US troops. A separate survey published by CBS News the day before found 68 percent wanted to see troops withdrawn entirely or drastically reduced. This poll also showed less than one third—30 percent—believe that the surge of 30,000 additional US troops into Iraq has registered any success, with the overwhelming majority saying that either it has had no impact or has made matters worse.

Thus, the turn by the Democratic leadership cannot be attributed to any fear of losing votes due to a shift in public opinion. Nor can it be explained—as the media consistently attempts to do—by some kind of parliamentary arithmetic, based on the possibilities of gaining the 60 votes needed to preclude a filibuster or the 67 required to override a presidential veto.

From the very first day it took over the reins of Congress, the Democratic Party has consistently renounced the only two genuine means at its disposal to end the war. The first is a vote to cut off funding, which can be achieved through a simple majority vote. The Democratic leadership has consistently rejected this course on the phony pretext that it must “support the troops”—by approving the money that keeps them in Iraq to be killed and maimed.

The second is impeachment of the president and vice president for dragging the country into a criminal war based upon lies, something that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced was “off the table” from the outset.

The charade staged by the Democrats—posturing as opponents of the war while foreswearing any action that could actually end it—was for all intents and purposes shut down last July when Levin’s initial amendment to the Defense Authorization Act setting the April 2008 deadline for a partial withdrawal failed to win the 60 votes needed to forestall a filibuster. At that point, the Pentagon funding measure was pulled from the legislative calendar and all debate suspended until after the scheduled report to Congress by Petraeus and Crocker.

Now that this report—hyped by both major parties and the media as some kind of “turning point” in Iraq—has come and gone, it is clear that the Democratic Party not only has no intention of waging a struggle to stop the war and end the occupation in Iraq, but has determined that even the pretense of opposing the war must be sharply curtailed.

In the end, the bitter differences that erupted over the debacle in Iraq were of an entirely tactical character. All the talk of troop withdrawals, when one strips away the rhetoric, boils down to whether the US occupation will continue with 130,000 troops or whether this force will be scaled down to somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000.

The decision to tone down the debate over this issue is driven by the consensus within the ruling elite as a whole that the stakes in Iraq for American capitalism are too high to abandon the project launched with the invasion of March 2003. Both parties fear that acknowledging defeat in Iraq would undermine the position of US imperialism internationally and encourage revolutionary movements all over the world.

Whatever their differences over military tactics, the role of diplomacy and who should pay the political price for the failures suffered in Iraq, Democrats and Republicans are agreed that the US must utilize its military might to offset its economic decline by establishing US hegemony over the strategic energy resources of the Persian Gulf.

Indeed, a persistent theme in Democratic criticism of the administration’s policy is the conception that US military resources are tied down in Iraq when they may soon be needed for a new war against Iran.

Moreover, with the 2008 presidential elections little more than a year away, the Democratic leadership recognizes that it stands a good chance of taking control of the White House and assuming responsibility for the Iraqi occupation. Given such a victory, promoting unrealistic popular expectations poses real dangers.

Finally, there is a bipartisan fear that under conditions of a deepening crisis of the political system as a whole and the growing threat of a major downturn in the world economy, encouraging the deep-going popular hatred of the war runs the risk of unleashing social forces that cannot be controlled.

It is necessary to draw the political lessons of the Democratic Party’s trajectory since the November 2006 election. The conception that the struggle against war can be waged by pressuring the Democrats to take action has proven entirely false and bankrupt.

Both major parties and all the existing political institutions function to disenfranchise the antiwar majority. They represent not the interests of working people—the vast majority of the population—but those of a narrow financial elite whose wealth and power are bound up with militarism.

The fight to end the war in Iraq and prevent the launching of even more horrific military adventures can be advanced only by launching a new independent political movement of working people against war and the system that creates it. Such a movement, independent of the Democrats and armed with a socialist and internationalist program, must be built to carry out the struggle for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and for holding accountable all those responsible for this war.



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