

Senate Democrats approve half a trillion dollars for Pentagon, US spy agencies

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In a succession of voice votes that were barely covered by the major media, the Democratic-led Senate has overwhelmingly approved approximately half a trillion dollars for the 2008 fiscal budgets funding the Pentagon's war machine and global US intelligence operations.

The measures, which sailed through the Senate with virtually no opposition, underscore the real position of the Democratic leadership and its support for US militarism, the months of phony debate over the Iraq war notwithstanding.

The Senate on Wednesday approved by a voice vote the Pentagon funding package that provides \$459 billion for the fiscal year that began on October 1.

The rubber-stamp action followed a vote on Monday to approve a massive \$648 billion National Defense Authorization Act, which not only sets spending limits for arms purchases, personnel costs and operating expenses for the Department of Defense, but also sets aside \$142 billion to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, \$17.4 billion for nuclear weapons programs run by the Energy Department and \$5.2 billion in military-related activities managed by other federal agencies.

A second vote is required to appropriate the war spending funds. The Bush administration has asked for another \$50 billion for the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, bringing the total in "emergency" funding for this year to more than \$190 billion.

The authorization act was approved by a lopsided 92-to-3 majority, with only Senator Robert Byrd, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Democratic Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin and Tom Coburn, an Oklahoma Republican, voting against it.

Added to the Pentagon budget bill Wednesday was an amendment—also approved by an overwhelming 95-to-1 vote, with not a single Democrat opposing it—providing an additional \$3 billion to pay for the continued deployment

of up to 6,000 US National Guard troops on the Mexican border. President Bush had threatened to veto funding for the militarization of border with Mexico when it had been included in the Homeland Security budget, and Republicans sought to transfer it to the bloated Pentagon funding bill to spare the White House the embarrassment of seeing the veto overridden. Democrats, for their part, were happy to spend a few billion more in order to appeal to anti-immigrant chauvinism.

The \$460 billion military budget represents nearly a 40 percent increase over the \$335 billion that was appropriated for the Pentagon in 2001, when Bush took office. The sum total of US military spending is greater than the combined military spending of all other nations on the planet.

The measure approved Wednesday increases Pentagon spending by \$43 billion, or more than 10 percent, over last year. Much of the new funding will go to pay for a series of expensive new weapons systems, including the F-22 Raptor fighter jet, V-22 tilt rotor aircraft, unmanned drone aircraft and the next generation of Joint Strike Fighters.

The military spending bill was approved after the defeat of a series of amendments proposed by the Democrats to support the redeployment of at least some US troops from Iraq. The last of these—submitted by Senator Feingold—was rejected Wednesday by an overwhelming 68-to-28 margin, with 21 Democrats voting against.

Feingold's amendment stated that none of the funds authorized for the Pentagon could be used "to continue the deployment in Iraq of members of the United States Armed Forces after June 30, 2008." It then went on to list a series of "exceptions" to which the funding cut-off would not apply, including "operations against ... terrorist organizations," providing "security for United States Government personnel and infrastructure," training the Iraqi puppet forces and paying for virtually anything

required to ensure the “safety and security” of the tens of thousands of American troops that would be kept in Iraq under these provisions.

The defeat of this nearly toothless amendment means that the Pentagon will have a free hand in spending its budget on the Iraq war, while another round of empty debate is organized before the Congress approves Bush’s request for the additional \$190 billion.

Also approved on Wednesday—this time by a unanimous vote—was the national intelligence authorization bill. The bipartisan approval of the legislation, most of which is kept secret, was prepared by the Democrats’ surrender to Republican pressure on several provisions that they had sought to attach to the measure.

Key among these was the demand made by both House and Senate intelligence committees for access to all of the president’s daily intelligence briefings from between 1997 and 2003 that referred to Iraq. The stated aim of procuring these documents was to establish the grounds for an investigation into charges that the White House had deliberately misrepresented intelligence about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in order to drag the American people into a war of aggression.

Prior to the 2006 midterm elections, Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee and in particular their ranking member, Senator Jay Rockefeller, had protested the Republican leadership’s refusal to conduct such a probe. Now that the Democrats are in the leadership and Rockefeller chairs the Senate intelligence panel, all pressure for such an investigation has ceased, and with Wednesday’s vote, the Democrats have signaled that they have no intention of pursuing the matter.

The total price tag for the intelligence bill—an estimated 80 percent of which is funneled through the Pentagon—is, like the programs it pays for, a state secret. It is estimated, however that the amount appropriated is generally in the neighborhood of 10 percent of the military budget, meaning approximately \$50 billion to pay for spying, electronic eavesdropping and covert operations all over the world and within the US itself.

The overwhelming bipartisan votes in favor of the mammoth military and intelligence spending bills are a prelude to what will inevitably be congressional approval of the \$190 billion requested by the Bush administration to pay for the Iraqi occupation and its ongoing escalation with the “surge” of an additional 30,000 US troops into the country.

A further indication that the Democratic leadership has no intention of using its power of the purse to halt funding

for the war came this week after Congressman David Obey, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, announced that he would keep the war spending bill in committee until the White House presented a plan to reduce troops deployments by January 2009. Obey also called for a war surcharge on income tax to pay for the occupation in Iraq.

The proposal drew a swift rebuke from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, seconded by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

The Democrats’ continued support and funding for the war in Iraq stands in stark contrast to the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of the American people, as was indicated once again by a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll released Tuesday.

The poll indicated that approximately 70 percent of the population opposes the appropriation of another \$190 billion to fund the war.

Also revealed by the poll was mass popular hostility not only towards the Bush White House, but towards Congress itself. Only 29 percent of those polled indicated approval of Congress’s performance, a sharp drop from 44 percent in mid-April. Bush’s positive rating was approximately the same, at about 30 percent.

Significantly, the greatest fall-off in support for Congress was registered among those calling themselves liberal Democrats, where the approval rating declined by a staggering 24 percent. Among the lowest approval ratings was that recorded from those calling themselves independents, which stood at just 24 percent. The poll data indicated that the decline was caused primarily by the Democrats’ failure to carry out any policy to end the Iraq war. The Democratic Party is increasingly seen by masses of people as the Bush administration’s accomplice in this criminal venture.



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