

One year since the 2006 election: The Democratic Congress and the war in Iraq

The Editorial Board
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November 7 marks one year since the US elections in which a mass turnout of antiwar voters defeated dozens of incumbent Republican congressmen and senators and put the Democratic Party in control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1994.

Every serious post-election analysis conceded that the Democrats won the 2006 election because of public disaffection with the war in Iraq. But one year later, the war not only continues unabated, it has been escalated.

Only two months after the vote, the Bush administration ordered an additional 35,000 troops into Iraq. US military operations expanded throughout the Baghdad region in areas north and south of the capital. American generals, having dropped the pretense that the “surge” is temporary, now openly speak of fighting a counterinsurgency war in Iraq for another decade, if not longer.

The death toll among Iraqis has climbed to almost unimaginable levels, with an estimated 1.2 million killed since the US invasion in 2003, according to a survey by the respected British polling firm ORB. While American casualties fell in September and October, the death toll among US troops in 2007 has reached the highest level for any year since the war began.

The Pentagon has also deployed additional troops to Afghanistan, and given them expanded authority for intervention into neighboring Pakistan. At the same time, Bush and Cheney have made repeated threats of military action against Iran, culminating in Bush’s notorious declaration October 17 that Iran risked “World War III” if it continued to defy US demands to dismantle its nuclear programs.

Throughout this process, as Bush and Cheney openly thumbed their noses at public antiwar sentiment, the Democratic Party has functioned as the principal enabler for American militarism. The “opposition” by the congressional Democratic leadership has consisted of rhetoric and political stunts, while in practice they rubber-stamp the continuation of the bloodbath in Iraq.

If the Republican Party rather than the Democrats had won the 2006 elections, there would not have been the slightest practical difference in terms of the Bush administration’s conduct of the war. The congressional Democrats have denied Bush nothing.

Congress has provided every penny of the funds requested by the White House to run the war. The Democratic-controlled Senate has confirmed every Bush nomination of leading war personnel, in many cases unanimously: a new secretary of defense, new commanders in Iraq and the US Central Command, a new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Within days, the Senate will confirm a new attorney-general who has refused to condemn waterboarding as torture.

Even before they officially regained power in Congress, the Democratic Party leadership had betrayed the antiwar sentiments that delivered them victory in the election. Within days of the 2006 vote, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, the future speaker of the house and senate majority Leader, had disavowed the only measures that could actually have forced an end to the war: impeachment of Bush or the cutoff of funding for US military

operations in Iraq.

The Democrats rejected impeachment—which requires only a simple majority in the House of Representatives—not because they lacked the votes in the Senate to remove Bush from office. They feared that impeachment proceedings would have raised before the American people the question of culpability for the war in Iraq, an issue with explosive political implications.

The core of any impeachment of Bush and Cheney would be the charge that the war in Iraq is illegitimate and criminal, engineered through a “big lie” campaign by the White House, and illegal under international law. The congressional Democratic leadership, who largely backed the invasion of Iraq, would be themselves liable for their complicity in this war crime. Moreover, such a charge would discredit the larger project of US imperialist domination of the Middle East, which the Democrats fully support.

The cutoff of funds represents the exercise of the traditional congressional power of the purse, an action requiring only a simple majority in either the House or Senate to block approval of the annual appropriations bill. Without affirmative congressional action by both houses, the executive branch runs out of money and shuts down operations—as took place in 1995-96 in the confrontation between President Bill Clinton and the Congress, then under Republican control.

The congressional Democratic leadership rejected such a course in relation to war spending even before they officially assumed power in the House and Senate. “We will not cut off funding for the troops,” Pelosi told MSNBC last December. “Let me remove all doubt in anyone’s mind. As long as our troops are in harm’s way, Democrats will be there to support them.”

Pelosi deliberately embraced the claim—devised by White House and ultra-right propagandists—that those who opposed further funding of the war did not “support the troops,” going so far as to suggest that cutting off funding for the war in Iraq would leave the troops on the battlefield without bullets for their guns. This canard had a definite political purpose—to disguise the decision of the congressional Democratic leadership to avoid the only action within their power to force an end to the war.

Instead, Pelosi, Reid & Co. devised an elaborate charade of non-binding resolutions, bills to limit the war that would be vetoed by Bush and not overridden, amendments to bills that could not overcome a Senate filibuster, and outright publicity stunts, like the 24-hour round-the-clock “debate” on the Iraq war held in the Senate in July—long after Congress had approved funding for the war by adopting the emergency spending authorization on May 24.

The goal was to provide a pretense of opposition to appease the antiwar constituency, while giving the White House and Pentagon a free hand to continue and even expand military operations in Iraq.

In actuality, as casualties mounted among both Iraqi civilians and American soldiers, and public opinion became increasingly hostile to the

war (recent polls show more than 60 percent favoring a congressional cutoff of funds), the measures proposed by the Democrats became more and more toothless.

This is not only a capitulation to the Bush administration, but reflects the growing belief in Democratic Party circles that they will control both the White House and Congress after the next election, and that it is necessary, as Hillary Clinton put it, to “preserve the options” of the next Democratic administration, which will be responsible for carrying on at least two wars.

There is no basic disagreement between the Democratic Party leaders and the White House, only tactical disputes over the best methods to secure US imperialism’s vast interests in the oil-rich Middle East. As the number two Democrat in the House, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, declared last December, “None of us want to see Iraq as a failure.”

The Democratic Party is a big business party which upholds the interests of the financial aristocracy that rules America and seeks to dominate the world. That political truth is demonstrated not only by the conduct of the Democratic Congress, but in the positions adopted by the leading contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In June, shortly after congressional approval of the war funding bill had shocked Democratic voters, the Democratic candidates all proclaimed their opposition to the war and their determination to bring it to a speedy end.

By late August, a consensus had formed in ruling circles that despite the gross mismanagement of the war in Iraq by the Bush administration, there was no alternative to continuing the conflict to salvage whatever was possible through even more widespread use of military force. All the leading Democrats, accordingly, at an August 21 presidential debate disavowed the goal of withdrawal of US forces by the end of 2007, calling it unrealistic.

At another debate a month later, none of the three leading Democratic hopefuls, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards, would commit themselves even to a pullout by *January 20, 2013*, the date of their second inaugural if they were elected and reelected president. The same week, Clinton voted for a non-binding resolution in the Senate urging the Bush administration to declare Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization, and implicitly backing a US military assault against Iran.

The Democratic Party now plays a critical role in sustaining the Bush administration, which has little public support and has seen a steady outflow of Bush’s principal advisers and cronies: the ouster of Rumsfeld and Gonzales, the conviction of Lewis Libby, the resignations of Rove, Harriet Miers, Don Bartlett, Karen Hughes and much of the second-level White House staff.

It is not just a matter of prostration before the White House. More fundamentally, the congressional Democrats are cowering before the power of the state, particularly its military-intelligence apparatus. At every key juncture, they have acted to sustain the power and prestige of this apparatus. This culminated in two congressional votes: in August to give expanded domestic spying powers to the NSA, CIA and other intelligence agencies, and in September to condemn MoveOn.org, a liberal Democratic lobby, for its public attack on General David Petraeus.

Every public statement by the congressional Democrats has a two-faced and half-hearted character. This is an expression of the essentially duplicitous role of the Democratic Party, which claims to defend the interests of the masses of ordinary working people, when it is, in reality, a political instrument of the same financial oligarchy that controls the Republican Party, the media, and the US economy and politics as a whole.

Thus the Democratic Congress has failed even to enact a measure closing the hedge fund tax loophole, which notoriously allows billionaires to pay a lower tax rate than their secretaries and janitors.

The role of the Democratic Party is to block any movement of working

people that would challenge the political monopoly of the corporate elite. In the 2000 election crisis in Florida, the Democrats accepted the theft of the presidential election through the intervention of the Supreme Court, rather than conduct a struggle that would have called into question the legitimacy of the political system.

In 2002, the Democrats kept the issue of the drive to war with Iraq out of the congressional election, even as they voted Bush a free hand to use military force. In 2004, with mass antiwar sentiment already evident, the Democrats virtually conceded the election by nominating a pro-war candidate, Senator John Kerry, who claimed to have a more effective program to win the war. And as soon as they won the 2006 election, profiting from antiwar sentiment almost despite themselves, the Democratic leadership quickly distanced themselves from those who had gone to the polls seeking an alternative to Bush’s program of war and social reaction.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party warned against illusions in the Democratic Congress from the moment of the Democratic election victory. Our first comment on the election, on November 8, 2006, declared: “There is a vast chasm between the massive antiwar sentiment within the electorate and the commitment of Democratic Party leaders to ‘victory in Iraq’ and continued prosecution of the ‘war on terror’ ... Those who voted for the Democratic Party in order to express their opposition to the Bush administration and the war will rapidly discover that a Democratic electoral victory will produce no significant change in US policy, either abroad or at home.”

An editorial board statement published December 4, 2006 was headlined, “Bush, Democrats disenfranchise antiwar voters.” It warned, “Four weeks after the November 7 US congressional elections, all sections of the American ruling elite have turned their back on the massive antiwar vote that repudiated the policies of the Bush administration, put an end to Republican control of both the House of Representatives and Senate and placed the Democratic Party in control of Congress.”

This warning has been confirmed over and over in the past year. Vital political conclusions must be drawn from this experience. The struggle against the war in Iraq and the uncontrolled growth of American militarism cannot be carried out through the election of a Democratic president in 2008 or an expanded Democratic majority in Congress. If Hillary Clinton were president today, her policy in Iraq would differ from Bush’s only by a few thousand combat troops, more or less.

Whichever big business party controls the levers of power in Washington in January 2009, government policy will be determined by the financial and strategic interests of corporate America, not by the wishes of the vast majority of the population, the working people.

The record of the SEP and the WSWS stands in sharp contrast to the role of the so-called “left,” represented by the leaders of antiwar organizations like United for Peace and Justice and International ANSWER, publications like the *Nation*, and pressure groups like MoveOn.org.

All these tendencies cultivate illusions in the Democratic Party and insist that popular opposition to the war must remain within the framework of the two-party system, which gives a political monopoly to corporate interests. All of them oppose a political break with the Democratic Party and the struggle to mobilize working people as an independent political force.

This task can no longer be postponed. Not a single step forward can be taken in the fight against war, in defense of democratic rights, and on behalf of the social and economic interests of working people without a complete and irrevocable break with the entire framework of bourgeois politics.

Working people must set out on the road of independent political struggle against the profit system, based on a socialist and internationalist

program. This means building the Socialist Equality Party and its youth organization, the International Students for Social Equality, as the revolutionary leadership of the working class. For more information about the SEP, please contact the WSWs. To join the ISSE and to find out more about building a chapter at your school, [click here](#).



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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