

Congress votes to fund war, bows to Bush on domestic policy

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The Democratic-led US Senate voted by a wide margin Tuesday night to approve \$70 billion to continue funding the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, without seeking to impose any conditions or pass any proposals for withdrawing a single soldier from either country. The vote came as the body also approved a \$516 billion domestic budget bill passed a day earlier by the House.

With just days to go until Congress begins its holiday recess, the Democratic leadership has once again orchestrated a legislative capitulation to the White House that will ensure that the war in Iraq—which they claim to oppose—continues, while making no major substantive changes in the domestic agenda set by the Bush administration.

The House on Monday passed the domestic spending bill by a comfortable margin of 253 to 154, despite charges by the Republican leadership that the measure contained an excessive amount of “earmarks,” specific funding mandates for pet projects sought by legislators for their home districts.

While the Republicans, echoed by the mass media, have denounced the budget as “bloated,” the package, which encompasses spending plans for every federal agency outside of the Defense Department, fails to even keep up with inflation. The total amount included in the so-called omnibus bill is only slightly more than the \$506.9 billion approved last week for the Pentagon (this does not count another \$189.4 billion approved for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) and the Department of Energy’s nuclear weapons programs. That measure passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, with only three “no” votes in the Senate and by a margin of 370 to 49 in the House. Virtually nothing was said on either side of the aisle about a “bloated” Pentagon or excessive arms spending.

In a second measure drafted by the House Democratic leadership, \$31 billion was provided for the US military operations in Afghanistan. While the measure included a proviso that this money should not be spent on the Iraqi occupation, it also provided for some of the money to be used for body armor and “force protection items” for troops in Iraq, which could have provided a significant loophole for money to be spent there. This bill was narrowly approved in a largely party-line vote, with 206—predominantly Democrats—in favor and 201 against.

The bill, which was crafted as a symbolic show of opposition to the war, in reality provided a guarantee that the money would be there to continue the colonial-style repression in Iraq. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday, “Army operations accounts would benefit from an infusion of about \$17.8 billion in new funds, enough money to avoid major disruptions through April and allow time for a fuller debate in the spring on the future of the US commitment in Iraq.”

All but five House Republicans opposed the measure, however, because it did not include money explicitly budgeted for the Iraq war. Bush had vowed to veto any spending legislation that failed to include funds for Iraq.

After getting only 43 votes to end debate on a motion to approve the House legislation (60 are required), the Senate went through the motions Tuesday night of debating two resolutions linking the Iraq war spending to calls for troop withdrawals.

The first, offered by Senator Russell Feingold (Democrat, Wisconsin) would have required the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, with the rather considerable exception of those deployed to protect US “infrastructure,” to train Iraqi forces, to carry out “counter-terrorism” operations or to protect any of these other forces. These provisions would mean tens of thousands of American soldiers and marines continuing to occupy the country indefinitely. This amendment went down to defeat by a margin of 71-to-24, getting four less votes than when it was last brought before the Senate.

A second amendment, offered by Michigan Democratic Senator Carl Levin, proposed no timetable, but merely a non-binding “goal” of beginning to reduce US forces in Iraq—something that has already happened as a result of the “surge” running out of units to replace those whose deployments are coming to an end. Levin stressed in his speech to the Senate that there was “no inconsistency whatsoever” in voting for his amendment and also voting to continue funding the war. This toothless “sense of the Senate” bill, which had several Republican sponsors, received 50 votes, with 45 voting against. Having failed to clear the 60-vote hurdle needed to close debate, it was effectively killed.

This left the final measure, which had been promised to the White House, an amendment sponsored by Republican Senate

Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and “Independent Democratic” Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, providing \$70 billion for the military interventions in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The bill included neither any conditions nor restrictions on where the money would be spent, providing the Bush administration with the “blank check” that Democrats had previously forsworn. This amendment passed by a vote of 70 to 25, meaning that only half of the Senate’s Democrats opposed unconditional funding of the Iraq war.

The funding, which would pay for the wars until May or June, brings the total amount spent on both US interventions to \$670 billion.

Based on the tacit understanding with the Congressional Democrats that this measure would indeed be passed, Bush gave an upbeat assessment of the budget process Monday that was starkly at odds with his repeated previous threats to veto any legislation that failed to meet his conditions on war funding and spending restraints.

“I’m pleased to report that we’re making some pretty good progress toward coming up with a fiscally sound budget—one that meets priorities, helps on some emergencies and enables us to say that we’ve been fiscally sound with the people’s money,” Bush declared in a speech on the economy delivered to a Rotary Club in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

House Republican leaders had initially condemned the domestic spending bill and called upon Bush to veto it. House Minority Leader John Boehner (Republican, Ohio) accused the Democrats of trying to “pile billions in worthless pork onto the backs of our troops.”

In addressing their own supporters, however, the Republicans were more candid. “This bill is a bigger disappointment to the Democrats than we would have expected, given that they do control both the House and the Senate,” Minority Whip Roy Blunt (Republican, Missouri) told a group of right-wing bloggers at the Heritage Foundation. “This Congress has spent more time in Washington, voted more times, and produced less, than any Congress in decades.”

This assessment was confirmed by a number of Democrats. Representative David Obey (Democrat, Wisconsin), the head of the House Appropriations Committee, called the budget “totally inadequate to meet the long-term investment needs of the country.” Saying that the voters who gave the Democrats majorities in both houses of Congress in the 2006 elections had delivered a mandate to end the Iraq war and shift domestic priorities, Obey acknowledged that “we’ve failed” on both counts.

The web site “Politico” quoted a senior Democratic Senate aide as asking, “Where is everything we fought for? Where is our backbone? What’s the point of being in charge and spending months writing these bills if we just end up folding to the administration?”

The *Wall Street Journal* estimated that the Democrats had given up 80 percent of the funding that they had originally

sought to add to the budget, bowing to Bush’s threat to veto any bill that exceeded his spending cap. They succeeded only in adding on various amounts by declaring them “emergency funding.” The largest of these included \$3.7 billion for veterans care and \$2.7 billion to fund a stepped up crackdown on immigrants through border security and worksite enforcement.

Capitulating to the White House, the Democrats abandoned their bid to amend reactionary legislation barring US aid for international family planning programs that offer abortions. They also shelved promised changes in the draconian measures barring US travel and trade with Cuba and a provision demanding that federal contractors pay union-scale wages on disaster relief projects, such as those on the Gulf Coast.

The Democrats also abandoned their proposal to roll back massive tax breaks for the profit-swollen US energy conglomerates. Included in the domestic spending plan is a provision which allows the US Energy Department to guarantee loans to energy companies for nuclear projects and the development of liquid coal production. Also jettisoned was a plan to fund an expansion of children’s health care programs with a hike in tobacco taxes.

Speaking to reporters Tuesday afternoon, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada) took exception to Republican claims of victory in the much-publicized budget showdown. “Who’s winning?” Reid asked. “Big oil, big tobacco...The American people are losing.” This unarguable conclusion is ultimately an expression of the firm corporate control exercised over both major parties.

With the Senate having carried through its part of the bargain with Bush by adding the \$40 billion to continue the carnage in Iraq, the two separate pieces of legislation—domestic spending and war funding—will go back to the House. In this elaborately choreographed charade, the bulk of the Democrats will then be able to vote against the money for Iraq—thereby attempting to boost their sagging antiwar pretenses—while the measure would be assured passage by a solid Republican “yes” vote backed by an adequate Democratic minority.

Once completed, this cynical arrangement will mark the third time since assuming control of Congress nearly a year ago that the Democrats will have provided the votes to continue funding the war in Iraq after proclaiming their determination to bring it to a halt.

What has emerged in this denouement of the so-called budget showdown is the fundamental unity of both major parties, whatever their tactical differences, on a policy of continuing war abroad and attacks on the conditions of life and basic rights of working people at home.



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