

One year of the Democratic 110th Congress: A record of duplicity, cowardice and political reaction

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The Democratic-controlled US Congress ended its first year in office Wednesday with a record of capitulation to the policies of the Bush administration all down the line. In the main areas where voters expected a change when they brought the Democrats to power in November 2006—the war in Iraq, the deterioration of working class living standards and social services, the mounting attacks on democratic rights—the Democrats have proven to be Bush’s collaborators, not his opponents.

The last major action of this congressional session was the passage of budget and tax legislation that demonstrates the gaping class divide in American society—and underscores the role of the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, as defenders of the financial aristocracy.

The \$555 billion spending bill funds the budgets of 11 of the 12 federal departments through the end of the fiscal year, next September 30. The Senate approved the bill Tuesday by 76-17, with a large majority of the Democrats joining all the Republicans to back legislation that conformed exactly to White House specifications.

The Senate voted by 70-25 to add \$40 billion in emergency funding for the war in Iraq to the overall spending bill, acting on an amendment introduced by Democrat Carl Levin of Michigan, chairman of the Armed Services Committee. The Senate rejected, by a 71 to 24 vote, an amendment to set a date for troop withdrawals from Iraq. Five fewer senators voted for the measure than backed a similar amendment last May.

The resulting bill, funding the war through the first several months of 2008, was approved by the House of Representatives Wednesday by a margin of 272 to 142. Nearly all the Republicans voted for the bill, while a majority of Democrats voted “no” in order to sustain their pretense of being “antiwar.” The support of a large minority of House Democrats, a total of 78, guaranteed final passage of the bill—the outcome desired by the Democratic leadership.

This week’s voting is at least the third such collapse of the supposed Democratic opposition to the war since the current Congress took office. The House and Senate passed an emergency funding bill pumping \$150 billion into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq last May, after months of empty protest were answered by Bush with a steady escalation of US military operations in Iraq (the “surge”).

The funding bill set a September deadline for a report back to Congress on the surge by top US military and foreign policy officials. Following the testimony of General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, Senate Democrats held a handful of test votes on antiwar amendments to the defense appropriations bill, lost each vote, and then abandoned the effort.

The Democrats’ record is no better on the other major political issues that have dominated this year’s congressional session. On democratic rights, the principal concern of the congressional Democratic leadership was that they might be branded as “soft on terrorism” if they opposed the Bush administration’s shredding of the Constitution.

There was no action to repeal the Patriot Act or to compel the Bush administration to shut down its concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Congress approved interim legislation last August granting the National Security Agency and other intelligence groups vastly wider powers to conduct wiretapping and other forms of domestic electronic surveillance, and the Democrats have promised to take up legislation in January to extend these powers indefinitely.

The Democrats did nothing to ban the use of torture by US intelligence agencies or to reverse the grossly unconstitutional legislation adopted one year ago that eliminates the right of *habeas corpus* for prisoners at Guantanamo and at secret US prisons in other overseas locations. The Democratic congressional leadership also caved in to the racist anti-immigrant campaign whipped up through right-wing talk radio, scuttling legislation that, while loaded with reactionary repressive measures, would have provided a path to legalization for some of the millions of undocumented workers now living in the US.

The Democrats moved aggressively only in their effort to oust Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, brought down by the scandal over the firing of US attorneys who failed to join in his efforts to target Democratic Party officeholders and candidates. But once Gonzales resigned, the congressional Democrats dutifully confirmed Michael Mukasey as his successor, despite Mukasey’s refusal to characterize water-boarding as torture and illegal under US and international law.

The only legislative “achievement” in the sphere of democratic rights was a retrogression—passage of legislation to enact several of the recommendations of the 9/11 commission which had been opposed by the Bush administration, including beefed up security measures at ports, airports and other transportation hubs, and increased funding of local police.

As for the Democrats’ claim to defend the socio-economic interests of working people against big business—the traditional basis of their election year demagoguery—the sole accomplishment of the 110th Congress was the first increase in the minimum wage in a decade. The Congress failed to override Bush’s veto of an expansion of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP) or his veto of funding for stem cell research.

In the omnibus budget bill given final passage this week, the Democrats in both House and Senate abandoned any effort to increase overall spending on government social services beyond the level proposed by the White House last February. In order to meet the Bush ceiling, the Democrats either dropped proposed spending increases or cut some social programs to pay for increases in others.

So complete was the Democratic collapse that House Minority Leader John Boehner, an Ohio Republican, gloated that the spending bill was “better than I’ve seen in my 17 years here”—which includes 12 years when Republicans, not Democrats, controlled Congress.

While hewing exactly to the dollar amount dictated by Bush on spending, the House and Senate voted an additional \$48 billion in tax reductions for middle- and upper-middle-income families being hit by the Alternative Minimum Tax, established in 1969 to target the wealthy, but not indexed for inflation.

A proposal to finance the tax cut by raising taxes on hedge fund billionaires passed the House, but was blocked after a vigorous lobbying campaign which enlisted the support of such Senate Democratic power brokers as Max Baucus of Montana, chairman of the Finance Committee, and Charles Schumer of New York, chairman of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee.

The Senate earlier blocked the tax increase on the hedge fund operators, then voted Tuesday to reject a different version of AMT “patch,” which would have funded the tax cut by closing down offshore tax havens used by hedge funds. The House then voted Wednesday by a margin of 352 to 64 to exempt 22 million families who would have fallen under the AMT this year, without any offsetting revenues, thus increasing the federal deficit and the pressure to cut domestic social spending even further next year.

In past years, a last-minute “omnibus” spending bill has become the vehicle for Congress to force changes in federal government policies against presidential opposition. This time, however, the congressional Democratic leadership withdrew every measure that drew objection from the White House. These included a repeal in the federal ban on US aid to organizations like Planned Parenthood that support abortion as a birth control measure overseas, an expansion of the Davis-Bacon Act, which requires payment of prevailing union wages on federally funded construction projects, and an easing of the US trade embargo against Cuba.

It is useful to contrast the record of the Democratic Congress in 2007 with that of the new Republican-controlled Congress that took office in 1995. Each newly elected majority confronted a president of the other party. The Republicans, however, proceeded to confront the Clinton White House aggressively. They enacted a budget based on their own priorities, including major cuts in Medicare and other domestic programs, and then, after a series of Clinton vetoes which they failed to override, forced the temporary shutdown of the federal government in an effort to prevail. When Clinton gained politically as a result of the confrontation and won reelection easily in 1996, the congressional Republicans launched a series of investigations, exposures and other legislative attacks that culminated in the impeachment of Clinton in December 1998.

The Democrats proceeded in a diametrically opposed fashion. Nancy Pelosi announced within days of the Democratic victory in November 2006 that there would be no effort to bring charges against Bush for his illegal war in Iraq or his trampling on the Constitution at home. Impeachment was “off the table,” the Democratic leaders declared.

Even more significantly, the congressional Democrats forswore the

use of the only constitutional means for compelling an end to the war in Iraq—a cutoff of congressional appropriations for the war. Exercising the “power of the purse” did not require overriding a Bush veto or overcoming a filibuster in the Senate, the supposed institutional obstacles that the Democrats cite incessantly today as the excuse for failing to end the war.

A Congress that was actually determined to end the war would have allowed current appropriations to expire and taken no action to renew them. Authorization to spend money on the war would have expired on September 30, 2007 regardless of any action taken by congressional Republicans or the White House.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer rejected such a course out of hand, even before the Democrats actually took their seats last January. Speaker Pelosi and the entire Democratic leadership in the Senate have followed suit, embarking instead on an endless series of protest stunts which accomplished nothing—and which they knew in advance would accomplish nothing. By one count, there have been more than 50 votes on “antiwar” resolutions in the House and Senate this year. But the White House simply ignored these impotent gestures, sending an additional 35,000 troops into Iraq and greatly expanding the scale of the violence.

After the latest collapse of the Democrats’ antiwar posturing, Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin of Illinois admitted that even with a larger majority the Democrats would have failed to cut off funds for the war. “There are always going to be Democrats who oppose the war but won’t support removing the funding,” he said—inadvertently previewing the conduct of the Democrats under a future Clinton or Obama administration.

The *Washington Post* summed up its scathing review of the 110th Congress with the comment, “Efforts to change Bush’s Iraq policies took on the look of Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg.” The rout was, indeed, of those dimensions, with one difference: the Confederates at Gettysburg were actually trying to win.

The congressional Democrats came to power because of mass popular opposition to the war in Iraq, but they never genuinely shared in that opposition. The Democratic Party, like the Republican, is an instrument of the American ruling elite which upholds the interests of American imperialism.

While there are, and remain, sharp divisions within the ruling elite over the Bush administration’s foreign policy, which is widely regarded as both incompetent and reckless, these are divisions over tactics and methods, not principle. A future Democratic administration, should one take office in January 2009, will continue the US occupation of Iraq and the effort to establish US hegemony over the Middle East, including control of the Persian Gulf and its vital oilfields.



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