

Democrats propose deal to extend Iraq war funding

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Leading congressional Democrats have outlined plans for a deal with the Bush White House that would continue funding the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan without any restriction, in return for a pittance of additional spending on domestic social programs.

The proposal was made public by House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer in a colloquy on the floor of the House December 6 and then elaborated in an interview with the editorial board of the *Washington Post* published that night on the newspaper's web site.

Hoyer said that the ongoing deadlock between the White House and Congress over appropriations for the current fiscal year could be resolved if Bush accepted about half the \$22 billion increase in domestic spending proposed by the Democrats, in return for congressional agreement to provide emergency funding for Iraq and Afghanistan without any deadline or timetable for withdrawal.

The arrangement would be similar to that worked out last spring, when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi allowed two separate votes on an emergency spending bill that combined war funding with an increase in the minimum wage. Democrats wishing to strike an "antiwar" posture could vote against the military funding, which passed with Republican votes. The majority of each party switched sides on the minimum wage rise, but the sizeable minority of House Democrats who voted for both measures ensured final passage.

This month's deal is, if anything, even more cynical in its betrayal of the antiwar sentiments of millions of voters who put the Democrats in control of Congress 13 months ago. The *Post* noted in its report on Hoyer's interview: "If the bargain were to become law, it would be the third time since Democrats took control of Congress that they would have failed to force Bush to

change course in Iraq and continued to fund a war that they have repeatedly vowed to end."

Hoyer was unabashed in his endorsement of the Democratic capitulation to Bush. "The way you pass appropriations bills is you get agreement among all the relevant players, among which the president with his veto pen is a very relevant player," he told the *Post*. "Everybody knows he has no intention of signing anything without money for Iraq, unfettered, without constraints. I think that's ultimately going to be the result."

The House reportedly will vote Tuesday on an omnibus spending bill providing over \$500 billion for various federal departments, including \$30 billion for the war in Afghanistan. The Senate will then take up the measure, adding \$40 billion for the war in Iraq, and then both houses will approve the resulting bill and send it on to the White House.

The outlines of this deal were first suggested by Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, and both Hoyer and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid have given their approval, pending White House agreement.

The principal opposition to the deal comes not from Democrats claiming opposition to the war, but from House Republicans who are adamant against any spending increase for domestic social programs and believe that the Bush administration should reject any compromise with the Democrats. Both House Minority Leader John Boehner and House Minority Whip Roy Blunt met with Bush last week and urged him to veto such a bill.

Blunt told reporters that the Democrats would cave in on war funding and that no concessions on domestic spending were necessary. "There's no reason to make a bad bargain," he said. "The president holds all the cards."

Congressional Democrats have already reduced the price of their support for continued funding of the slaughter in Iraq from \$22 billion—the total increase in domestic spending above the White House budget request—to \$11 billion. The likely result of the backroom wrangling among the two parties is an even smaller increase, perhaps only a few billion dollars, less than one percent of the budget, in return for an extension of war funding through the end of Bush's presidency.

This is not simply an act of political surrender—that term would imply that the congressional Democrats actually wanted to halt the war but were overawed by the power of a president who is a widely despised lame duck. The truth is that Pelosi, Hoyer, Reid & Co. had absolutely no intention of ending the war in Iraq, let alone doing so through a confrontation with the White House.

Hoyer spelled this out most crudely, telling the *Post* editorial board—like him, a fervent supporter of the initial US invasion of Iraq, “We have to get to a point where the American public more clearly perceives our policy position and is not confused by whether or not the Democrats intend to support the troops that we’ve sent to Iraq. I don’t think there’s an option on that.”

This is the umpteenth iteration of the grotesque falsification that “support” for the troops requires spending countless billions to continue their maiming and death in Iraq, while escalating the mass killing that has already taken the lives of more than a million Iraqi civilians.

Another leading congressional Democrat, Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, endorsed the proposed deal Friday, saying, in reference to the emergency war spending, “One way or another, there, I believe, will be bridge funding provided, and should be.”

Speaker Pelosi, who has not signed off on the final form of the appropriation bill, acknowledged that the House would approve the additional spending on the war in Afghanistan, the first step in the deal. “There will probably be some level of addressing Afghanistan,” she told reporters. She said a Bush veto of the bill would be “reckless.”

Pelosi and Reid issued a joint statement declaring, “America expects this president to lead—that means working in a bipartisan way with Congress to

responsibly address our country’s priorities rather than issuing veto threats without even knowing what he is threatening to veto.”

House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey, a Wisconsin Democrat, said he might abandon the effort to split the difference on spending increases and simply pass a budget that pays for the increases by cutting congressional earmarks and Bush administration spending priorities. He voiced the fear that a deal to fund the war in return for a small increase in domestic spending might produce a political backlash against the Democrats from antiwar voters, saying, “I don’t see how we have any choice but to go to the president’s numbers on appropriations to make clear that we aren’t going to link the war with token funding on the domestic side.”

Whatever the outcome of the legislative maneuvers, the Bush administration has clearly taken the measure of its nominal opposition in Congress. Vice President Cheney expressed his contempt in an interview Thursday with politico.com, in which he gloated that the congressional Democrats “had lost their spines. They are not carrying the big sticks I would have expected.”

Noting the Democrats’ failure to accomplish anything in relation to curbing the war in Iraq, he said, “They’ve produced absolutely nothing that I can see that’s of benefit or consistent with the promises that they made when they went out and ran for election.”



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