

Bush pressures Congressional Democrats on war funding

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In a sharp escalation of the political rhetoric surrounding the dispute between the White House and the Democratic-led Congress over money for the Iraq war, President Bush delivered a speech at the Pentagon Wednesday afternoon threatening mass layoffs of civilian employees of the Defense Department, the suspension of contracts and scaling back of operations at US bases unless his funding request is promptly approved.

Bush couched his demand in a thinly veiled charge that the Democrats were stabbing US troops in the back and endangering their lives. “The American people expect us to work together to support our troops,” he said. “That’s what they want. They do not want the government to create needless uncertainty for those defending our country, and uncertainty for their families. They do not want disputes in Washington to undermine our troops in Iraq just as they’re seeing clear signs of success.”

This is, of course, all nonsense. Poll after poll have indicated that what the American people—and the troops themselves—want is the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. As for creating “uncertainty” among those sent to occupy Iraq, the repeated deployments and the sudden extensions of their tours of duty have already done that, producing a mounting crisis in military recruitment and retention.

Bush insisted that the Democratic leadership pass his request for nearly \$200 billion more in “emergency” war funding before adjourning for the congressional Christmas recess.

The House last month passed a bill providing a first installment of this funding—\$50 billion to cover costs until March—while attaching a series of conditions aimed at painting the measure in antiwar colors. These provisions, virtually all non-binding or non-enforceable—would do nothing to actually end the war. They included the call for the administration to withdraw an unspecified number of troops in 30 days—something that is already happening as

the Pentagon has run out of units needed to maintain the “surge” and is bringing back a brigade combat team that will not be replaced.

Also attached to the funding was a non-enforceable goal to end combat operations in Iraq by December 2008—which, by definition, would still allow the continued deployment of tens of thousands of US occupation troops under the pretext of combating terrorism, training Iraqi forces and protecting US assets.

Nonetheless, the bill was effectively killed by the Republicans in the US Senate and, in any case, would have been vetoed by the White House, which has rejected even any symbolic restrictions on its war powers.

With Congress having already approved nearly half a trillion dollars in funding for the Pentagon this year, there is no immediate need to carry out the kind of layoffs and cutbacks threatened by Bush.

Nonetheless, there are mounting indications that the Democrats may soon cave in to the propaganda campaign and give Bush a funding measure he is prepared to sign.

In his response to Bush’s threat, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada) also cast the funding issue as a question of endangering the troops, while attempting to shift the blame onto the White House.

Bush and the Republicans, he charged, “are so afraid of being held accountable for their failed war policy that they would rather leave our men and women on the battlefield short-handed than work with us to adjust this disastrous strategy.”

The Senate Democratic leader’s language is significant. It is not a question of ending the war, but rather “adjusting the strategy,” in cooperation with the administration.

Reid’s remarks were echoed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who said, “We have provided every penny that is currently necessary to fund Defense Department operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world. It is

President Bush and his Republican allies in the Senate who are preventing extra funds from reaching our troops.”

The idea that the money voted to continue a war that has claimed the lives of at least 3,880 US military personnel is somehow meant to benefit “our troops” is an obscene fiction subscribed to by Democrats and Republicans alike.

The statements from the Senate and House Democratic leaders followed even more telling remarks by Representative John Murtha, who chairs the key House subcommittee on military spending and was an early Democratic advocate of “redeployment” of US troops in Iraq.

Having returned November 27 from a trip to Iraq, Murtha proclaimed that “the surge is working” and voiced the opinion that the security situation in the occupied country had improved “substantially.”

Murtha, who serves as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s top adviser on military questions, added that he was “optimistic” that the Democratic leadership and the White House could reach an agreement on funding. “Congress wants to come up with an agreement,” he said Thursday in a video press conference from his home district office in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. “Leadership may be willing to compromise,” he added, in relation to the call for a withdrawal timetable.

The Pennsylvania congressman said that his belief that a compromise could be reached on war funding had been strengthened by a telephone discussion Tuesday with Bush’s so-called war czar, Lt. Gen. Douglas Lutte. The deal the two reportedly discussed was that Congress would pass additional funding and extend the suggested timetable for withdrawing “combat troops” from Iraq in return for the administration’s agreement to accept other provisions banning torture by all US personnel and establishing readiness standards for troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Murtha defended the relaxed timetable by suggesting that, because of the vast amount of military equipment deployed by the US in Iraq, any withdrawal could take two years.

After Republicans circulated copies of Murtha’s remarks as reported in a Pennsylvania newspaper, the congressman issued a public statement to “clarify” what he had said.

“The military surge has created a window of opportunity for the Iraqi government,” the statement said. “Unfortunately, the sacrifice of our troops has not been met by the Iraqi government and they have failed to capitalize on the political and diplomatic steps that the

surge was designed to provide. “The fact remains that the war in Iraq cannot be won militarily, and that we must begin an orderly redeployment of US forces from Iraq as soon as practicable.”

Murtha reiterated the position take by Reid and Pelosi, calling for Bush to enact the legislation already passed by the House.

Murtha’s flip-flopping is symptomatic of the further shift to the right by the entire Democratic Party leadership. Indeed, his call for a “compromise” on funding came just days after Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, vowed that the Democratic leadership would appropriate the war funding, even if its attempts to tack on withdrawal goals were blocked.

“We’re going to fund the troops,” Levin, a Michigan Democrat, said in a “Fox News Sunday” interview November 25. “No one’s trying to undercut the military.”

While attempting to maintain a façade of opposition to the war in order to placate the antiwar sentiment that prevails among the vast majority of the public, the party’s differences with the Bush administration over Iraq have never been more than tactical. Increasingly, it has criticized the White House from the right, not for carrying out an illegal invasion and murderous occupation, but rather for failing to achieve “success” in this criminal venture.

Its calls for “adjusting strategy” in Iraq represent a direct repudiation of the desire of the vast majority of the American people for an end to the war. Like the Bush administration, the Democratic leadership envisions tens of thousands of troops remaining after “redeployment” in what amounts to a permanent colonial occupation of the oil-rich country.

Whether the additional funding is approved before Christmas or afterwards, it is clear that the Democratic Party will remain the Bush administration’s willing accomplice in continuing the war.



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