

Calling Pelosi's bluff, Republicans temporarily block war-funding bill

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After faithfully funding the war in Iraq for more than five years, the US House of Representatives voted Thursday, for the first time ever, against a so-called supplemental appropriations bill to pay for the fighting to continue.

Far from this decision signaling any Congressional rebellion against the war policy of the Bush administration, however, the bill's defeat was—from the standpoint of the House Democratic leadership—an unanticipated and unwelcome political detour, precipitated by the Republicans.

The funding measure provided \$162.5 billion to pay for the US wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan into the summer of 2009—several months after Bush leaves office and the next president takes control of the White House. When it was put to a vote, 132 Republicans sat on their hands, answering “present.” As a result, it went down to defeat by a narrow margin, with 141 voting in favor and 149 against.

Among those supporting the war-funding measure were 85 Democrats, who, together with the House Republicans, had been expected to assure its easy passage.

The vote had been elaborately and cynically choreographed by the House Democratic leadership with the aim of allowing the party's members to register an empty protest against the war, while assuring that the money was approved to keep the war going.

Moreover, the Democratic leadership had bundled together funding for fiscal 2008 and 2009 in a single package in order to avoid another politically embarrassing vote to fund the war on the eve of the November elections.

To expedite this process, the legislation was carved into three separate measures, each to be voted on separately. The first was the war funding itself, the second a nonbinding call for US troops to be withdrawn from Iraq by December 2009, and the third a package of domestic spending proposals, including a major expansion of GI Bill benefits for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

This allowed Democrats seeking to placate the overwhelming antiwar sentiment in the American public to vote against paying for the war and for the toothless withdrawal plan, while “supporting the troops” with the GI

bill measure. Moreover, they believed they could do so without any fear of actually cutting off war funding, counting on a solid bloc of Republicans joined by a sufficient number of Democrats to assure passage of the funding measure.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Democrat, California) was among those voting against the war funding, even after she had worked out the political mechanisms that she had counted on to get the money approved.

The House Republican leadership, however, balked at playing their assigned role in this charade. Doubtless seeking to score some political points in the wake of a string of three disastrous by-elections in which previously safe Republican congressional seats have been lost to Democrats, they decided to throw a monkey-wrench into the works.

Their abstention produced the odd spectacle of Democratic leaders denouncing the Republicans for failing to support the war.

“With today's vote, the Republicans have shown that they are confused and are in disarray,” said an irate Speaker Pelosi. “House Republicans refused to pay for a war they support.”

“Republicans had the choice—fund the troops or don't fund the troops. They voted present,” said House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (Democrat, Maryland).

House Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel of Illinois sounded the same theme, stating, “You can't say something is the critical battle of our time and vote present. Explain that to the troops.”

House Minority Leader John Boehner (Republican, Ohio) responded to the Democratic indictments. “It was a political scheme,” he said. “We wanted to expose it, and we did.”

The Republicans took their own action, confident that the Democratic-led Senate will take up the war-spending measure next week and restore the money that was voted down Thursday in the House as well as strip the nonbinding troop-withdrawal language from the legislation. A “clean” war-funding appropriations bill will then be sent back to the House, where the Republicans will vote for it.

Less clear is what will happen with the GI Bill expansion

and other domestic measures that have been attached to the supplemental spending legislation. Thirty-two House Republicans joined with Democrats in a 256-166 vote to approve the measure.

The GI Bill proposal would cover costs for veterans who have served for at least three years on active duty to attend any state university, while granting an additional housing stipend. The total cost of the program has been estimated at \$52 billion. The House version proposed funding this measure by imposing a surtax of less than half a percentage point on income over \$500,000 for individuals and \$1 million for couples.

This populist tax-the-rich proposal is almost certain to be killed in the Senate, where Democratic as well as Republican leaders have voiced objections to implementing any new taxation. “I support it personally, but that doesn’t mean it’s going anywhere,” Senator Richard Durbin, the Illinois Democrat and Majority Whip, said of the tax plan.

Other domestic measures attached to the bill include a 13-week extension of unemployment benefits as well as funding for international food aid, the rebuilding of the New Orleans levees, federal prisons and the 2010 census.

The troop withdrawal amendment to the spending measure passed by a vote of 227 to 196, largely along party lines, but with eight Republicans joining the Democratic majority.

Significantly, as with previous legislation and similar to the proposals put forward by Democratic presidential candidates Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the language provides for the continued deployment of US troops in Iraq after December 2009 for purposes of “protecting the diplomatic facilities, Armed Forces, and citizens of the United States in Iraq,” “training of, equipping, and providing logistical and intelligence support to, Iraqi security forces” and “engaging in targeted counterterrorism operations.”

Such a scheme would involve the indefinite occupation of the country by tens of thousands of American troops and the continued bombing and killing of Iraqi civilians by US forces for years to come.

Other provisions in this amendment include an anti-torture measure demanding that US intelligence agencies limit their interrogation techniques to methods authorized in the US Army Field manual. This too is expected to be removed from the version approved by the Senate, where it would almost inevitably face a Republican filibuster.

Also included are provisions limiting the length of deployments in Iraq to 365 days for members of the US Army and 210 days for members of the Marine Corps, while providing so-called dwell time outside of the combat zones of equal length between deployments.

Combined with these proposals are a series of reactionary

measures that underscore the Democrats’ complicity with the dirty colonial-style war to subjugate Iraq. One prohibits the US government from negotiating any agreement that would place US military forces under the jurisdiction of Iraqi laws or courts. Others demand that the Iraqi government match “dollar-for-dollar” any US funds spent on rebuilding the war-ravaged country. One clause instructs the US Secretary of State to “work expeditiously with the Government of Iraq to establish an account within its annual budget sufficient to, at a minimum, match United States contributions.” Nothing could more clearly define the puppet status of the Iraqi regime.

Similarly, the legislation demands that Iraq sell fuel to the US occupation forces at subsidized rates.

Predictably, the antiwar protest organizations oriented to the Democratic Party hailed these reactionary developments in the House as a victory. United for Peace and Justice, for example, called the Republican-engineered scuttling of the spending measure “an amazing turn of events” and “a tremendous victory for the antiwar movement” It showed, the group said, the “need to keep up the pressure on both the House and the Senate.”

On the contrary, the cynical political maneuvering on Capitol Hill has once again exposed the futility—if not outright duplicity—of trying to base any struggle against war on an orientation to the Congress and the Democratic Party.



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