

Congressional Democrats plan three-stage charade to pass Iraq war funds

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In order to once again approve hundreds of billions of dollars to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while posturing as opponents of “Bush’s war,” the Democratic leadership in Congress has crafted an elaborate legislative charade that is set to begin unfolding this week.

The leadership’s scheme involves splitting contradictory measures contained within the massive spending bill and putting them to separate votes in an attempt to placate the divergent wings of an increasingly fragmented party.

The Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi of California, has promised to have a war funding bill on Bush’s desk before the end of this month. The House bill is to authorize \$162.5 billion in war spending—nearly \$100 billion to cover war costs for the current fiscal year, which goes through the end of September, plus tens of billions more to pay for the fighting into the summer of 2009, more than five months after the next president takes office.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat of Nevada) said on Monday that a war funding bill would be brought before the Senate on Wednesday. Reid, however, was less sanguine about the prospects of the legislation being passed before the Congress begins its Memorial Day break.

“We are not going to be panicked into completing this,” Reid said in remarks delivered on the Senate floor. “We know there is enough money to fund the troops for a considerable period after the Memorial Day recess,” he continued. “We’ll do our best to get that done, but we’re not going to be pushed into doing something we don’t think is appropriate.”

The administration has attempted to create a crisis atmosphere around the war funding debate, with the Pentagon warning that it may be forced to begin sending out temporary layoff notices to some of the Defense Department’s more than 200,000 civilian employees and

halt pay checks to the troops if the measure does not pass before mid-June.

The aim of bundling money for fiscal 2009 with the appropriation for 2008 is to get the issue of Iraq off the table, politically speaking, before the height of the 2008 election campaign. The Democratic leadership has signaled its desire to place the war on the back burner, while concentrating its campaign on economic issues.

This strategy echoes that pursued by the Democrats in 2002, when the party supplied the votes needed to pass the measure granting Bush a blank check to invade Iraq on the theory that it could win the midterm congressional races that year by ceding the war issue to the White House and running on issues related to the economy. The result was a resounding defeat for the Democrats that left the Republicans in control of both houses of Congress for the next four years.

As the *Wall Street Journal* put it on Saturday, “Democratic leaders in the House have been hoping for quick passage of emergency funding for the Iraq war—an issue that splits their party and diverts valuable attention from the economic issues they think will help them win this year’s elections.”

Additional monies requested by the administration for operations in the Middle East, “war on terrorism” activities, domestic military construction, food aid and other items would bring the total package to roughly \$183 billion.

On top of that, the Democratic leadership has proposed additional “sweeteners” that would bring the total price tag for the supplemental legislation to over \$200 billion, none of it funded by specific revenues. These measures include an extension of benefits for the long-term unemployed and a significant expansion of educational benefits for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans under the GI Bill.

The veterans’ benefits alone—which would provide full

college tuition at any state school along with a housing stipend—are projected to cost \$51.8 billion over the next 10 years.

A conservative wing of the House Democrats, the so-called “Blue Dogs,” who account for 48 votes, have opposed the measures on the grounds that they violate the Democrats’ “pay-as-you-go” rule, requiring that any new spending be covered by additional taxes or offsetting cuts to other parts of the budget.

Meanwhile, the so-called “Out of Iraq Caucus” has opposed passing unconditional funding for the war and demanded that the Democratic leadership once again attempt to condition the new monies on a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. This proposal mandates that American occupation troops begin coming home in 30 days, with a full withdrawal completed in 18 months.

Democrats are also pushing for amendments aimed at compelling Iraq to pay for the cost of its own occupation. These proposals are predicated on the reactionary and demagogic contention that the Iraqis are insufficiently grateful for the beneficence of the United States—whose invasion and occupation have killed an estimated one million Iraqis—and the charge that the occupied country is failing to meet its commitments and even profiting off of American largesse.

Proposals are being submitted barring any further US funding for Iraqi reconstruction unless it is matched dollar-for-dollar by the Iraqi puppet regime, and demanding that Iraq sell fuel to the US military at the same price it charges Iraqi citizens.

Bush, meanwhile, has vowed to veto any legislation that includes additional monies, including those for the GI Bill expansion. In a closed-door meeting with congressional Republicans last week, he urged them to vote against the veterans’ benefits and to uphold his veto.

By holding three separate votes—one on the war spending, a second on the veterans’ and unemployment benefits and a third on a troop withdrawal timetable—the Democratic leadership aims to provide political cover for all wings of the party. Those aiming to run as antiwar candidates can vote against the war funding, while voting for the timetable and the new benefits, while fiscal conservatives can vote for the war funding, but against the benefits.

The Pelosi leadership is confident that, should the timetable measure pass the House, it will be stripped from the legislation by the Senate Democratic leadership. And, if as expected, Bush vetoes a measure that includes the GI

Bill and unemployment benefits, Congress will ultimately pass an unadorned war funding bill and the Democrats will use the veto as a campaign issue in November.

This was already evident in a speech delivered by the Democratic presidential front-runner, Senator Barack Obama, in Charleston, West Virginia on Monday, in which he described the Republican Party’s presumptive presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, as “one of the few senators of either party who oppose this bill because he thinks it’s too generous.”

In May of last year, in response to White House vetoes, the Democratic leadership ended a similar legislative process by abandoning all of its proposals for troop withdrawal timetables, “benchmarks” and other restrictions on the administration’s conduct of the war. The Democrats supplied ample votes in both houses of Congress to ensure passage of an unencumbered \$100 billion to pay for continuing the death and destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The end of the elaborate legislative process being organized this year will inevitably be the same. Under conditions in which every opinion poll has shown both popular opposition to the Iraq war and hostility to the Bush White House at record highs, the Democrats are unwilling and unable to mount a genuine opposition to the war.

From the run-up to the US invasion six years ago to the eve of the 2008 election, the Democratic Party has remained an indispensable accomplice in the waging of this neo-colonial war and occupation. Nor is there any reason to believe that the party will cease its support for this criminal venture should it capture control of the White House in November.



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