

Bush, Democrats seek to fund Iraq war into next administration

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In a bid by the two major parties to prevent November's presidential election from being turned into a referendum on the war in Iraq, the Bush administration and the Democratic leadership in Congress are both working to craft new war funding legislation that would pay for the fighting to continue at the present level well past January, when the next president takes office.

According to media reports, the congressional Democrats are still debating how—not if—they will approve the money needed to continue the ongoing wars against the peoples of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last Friday, President Bush formally submitted a detailed request for a \$70 billion “bridge” appropriation that would fund the wars from the beginning of the next fiscal year in October 2008 through the spring of 2009. This comes on top of the \$108 billion that the administration has requested for the current fiscal year.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, the new spending bills would bring the total amount approved by Congress to pay for the two wars since their inception to \$875 billion.

While the congressional leadership had projected that legislation could be introduced as early as this week and wrapped up before the Memorial Day recess, key Democrats have indicated that the process may not prove that speedy.

Representative Steny Hoyer, the Democratic House majority leader, said he thought it was unlikely that a vote on the measure would come this week as initially anticipated.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat of Nevada) said that there was no certainty that Congress would meet the Memorial Day deadline and insisted that it did not really matter. “We will do best to finish this by the Memorial Day break,” Reid said. “But if we don't, it's no big deal, there is money there.” The Pentagon, he noted, has adequate funding to pay for the war into June.

Apparently at issue is a disagreement between House and Senate Democratic leaders about how far they should take the political charade that is organized each time the war spending measures come up. The aim of this exercise is to allow Democratic legislators to posture as war opponents, while assuring that the necessary votes are forthcoming to pass the legislation paying for the wars.

According to the Associated Press, House Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey “are pushing to avoid a veto” by Bush, while the Senate leadership is more willing to drag the process out.

“We would rather just save time and get it over with right from the start,” Pelosi told Capitol Hill reporters last Thursday.

Pelosi reportedly is proposing to organize a separate vote on a troop withdrawal amendment—rather than writing it into the funding legislation itself—and is attempting to short circuit any consideration and debate within the relevant congressional committees.

In a May 3 article on the dilemma facing the congressional Democratic leaders, the *Wall Street Journal* cited their fear that they “could seem insensitive to the military if they push too hard to add their spending priorities to the measure.” At the same time, the *Journal* noted that “they also could frustrate their vocal antiwar base if they cave in too readily to White House demands.”

Such is the political tightrope upon which Pelosi, Reid and their Senate and House colleagues are performing. They are committed to passing the war spending measure, out of fear that they could be tarred as weak on national security and accused of failing to “support our troops.” At the same time, they want to carry out this support for the war in a way that does not appear to “cave in too readily” to the White House, so as to preserve the illusions of those who still look to the Democrats as some kind of antiwar alternative to the policies of the Bush

administration.

Pelosi has promised to introduce language that would tie domestic spending initiatives, such as a 13-week extension of unemployment benefits and a new college benefits package for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, to the war spending bill.

These add-ons are being proposed with the knowledge that the White House will threaten a veto unless they are removed. The intention, congressional Democrats have indicated, is to thereby “expose” the Republicans as placing a greater priority on continuing the war than on solving social needs at home.

In the end, however, the Democrats will act to approve legislation based on these same priorities. “The leadership has decided to avoid a confrontation,” a senior Senate aide told the *Wall Street Journal*. “It’s a strategic decision to avoid picking a fight where he [Bush] wants to pick a fight.”

The strategy of the Democratic leadership has the effect of diverting the debate over the Iraq war away from any consideration of the criminal character of the war itself into one over budgetary priorities and processes, in which the Bush administration will inevitably take the offensive, accusing the Democrats of larding up a military spending bill with non-military appropriations

The Bush administration has attempted to ratchet up the pressure for a speedy approval of the war funding bills by threatening to begin sending out furlough notices to civilian employees of the Defense Department as early as Memorial Day. These temporary layoffs, officials have warned, could affect as many as 200,000 of the Pentagon’s civilian workers.

One crucial issue upon which the White House and the congressional leadership appear to have an agreement is that the \$70 billion “bridge” appropriation designated for fiscal 2009 can be voted on together with the \$108 billion pending for fiscal 2008.

The transparent political motive on the part of the Democrats is to avoid having to vote to fund the war yet again on the eve of the November election.

“Last year they had to be pushed and cajoled into providing that bridge funding, so we see it as a positive thing that they are looking to address that earlier rather than later,” Stephen S. McMillin, deputy director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, told *Congressional Quarterly News*.

The \$70 billion request submitted by the White House for fiscal 2009 includes \$45.1 billion to pay for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and another \$5.7

billion for building up puppet security forces in the two countries.

Other items in the legislation include:

- * \$3 billion for classified activities.

- * \$2.5 billion for the “global war on terrorism.”

- * \$1.7 billion for the Commander’s Emergency Response Program, a slush fund used by US occupation forces to bribe local forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- * \$1.3 billion to buy 28 more unmanned aerial vehicles, the remote-controlled killing machines that have been increasingly used against residents of the crowded slum neighborhoods of Baghdad’s Sadr City.

- * \$2.2 billion for increased fuel costs.

One clearly nonmilitary item that Bush himself has proposed be added to the war funding bill is a \$770 million world food aid package. That Washington’s response to the gravest threat of global starvation in generations—something that Bush treated as a threat to “our national security”—amounts to less than one one-thousandth the sum spent thus far in the campaign to subjugate two impoverished countries and turn them into American semi-colonies is a testament to the predatory character of US imperialism.

While the phony fight over the war funding bills unfolds on Capitol Hill, the real slaughter that this legislation will pay for grinds on.

US military officials, continuing their daily announcements of body counts, reported Monday that US troops killed nine “militants” in Baghdad. An AC-130 gunship—one of the military’s most lethal warplanes, which is able to slowly circle for prolonged periods, pounding those below with intense cannon and machinegun fire—was unleashed on the densely populated streets of Sadr City.

Local hospitals in the area reported taking in the bodies of at least six people and receiving 41 wounded, many of them women and children.

Meanwhile, the military announced on Sunday that four US Marines had been killed two days earlier in a roadside bombing in western Anbar province, bringing the US death toll in Iraq to 4,071.



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