

Democrats back US militarism

Senate approves \$91 billion for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

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By a margin of 86-3, the US Senate voted late last Thursday to approve a \$91.3 billion supplemental funding bill to finance the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through September 30. The bill, which is expected to go to President Obama to sign within two weeks, brings the total expended on the two wars of aggression to more than \$900 billion over eight years.

Democratic Senate candidates postured as opponents of the war in Iraq in both the 2006 and 2008 elections, and an antiwar appeal was critical to candidate Obama winning the Democratic presidential nomination and then the presidency last year. But the Senate Democrats provided near-unanimous support to the new war spending sought by the new Democrat in the White House.

Of the 59 members of the Democratic caucus in the Senate (including two independents), only two voted against the supplemental appropriations bill. Voting for more war funding were such liberals as John Kerry of Massachusetts, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Tom Harkin of Iowa and Barbara Boxer of California. The Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Majority Whip Dick Durbin backed the legislation as well.

The senators appointed to take the seats of Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton all voted for the war funding.

The last hurdle before passage of the bill was the defeat of an amendment offered by ultra-right South Carolina Republican Jim DeMint opposing additional US funding for the International Monetary Fund. The vote was 64-30 against, on a largely party-line vote. In a demagogic attempt to blame an external scapegoat for the financial crisis caused by Wall Street, DeMint declared, "This is the worst time to ask struggling American families to bail out foreign countries."

The IMF funding, using \$5 billion in US Treasury funds to

underwrite \$108 billion in new lending authority, is the only major difference between the Senate bill and the version passed by House of Representatives on May 14. A House-Senate conference committee will begin meeting in early June to prepare the final bill for Obama's signature.

Several leading House Democrats, most notably Appropriations Committee chairman David Obey of Wisconsin, have voiced opposition to the IMF funding on the grounds of economic nationalism. Two Senate liberals, Russ Feingold of Wisconsin and Bernard Sanders of Vermont, voted for the DeMint amendment on the same basis.

Several reactionary amendments were added to the supplemental legislation in the last few days. On Wednesday, the Senate adopted, by overwhelming 92-3 and 90-6 votes, amendments that would prohibit the spending of money to close the Guantanamo detention camp or to transfer Guantanamo detainees to the United States. (See "Senate Democrats Block Funding for Guantanamo Bay Closure", 21 May 2009)

The Senate also approved, by voice vote, an amendment that would have the effect of shutting down a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union seeking the release of military photos showing US torture of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama initially agreed to settle the suit by releasing the photos, then reversed himself last week under pressure from the Pentagon and particularly General Raymond Odierno, the commander of US forces in Iraq.

The ACLU has won a court order from the US Court of Appeals, and the White House has been considering whether to appeal that decision to the US Supreme Court or to retroactively classify the photographs as "top secret", using such an administrative action to delay or block their release. The Senate provision, which is virtually certain to end up on Obama's desk, would exempt the torture photos from the Freedom of Information Act entirely, thus removing the legal

grounds for the ACLU suit.

In the brief discussion on the amendment, senators of both parties echoed the position of the military that release of the photos would inflame public opinion in Iraq and Afghanistan and thus endanger the troops. This argument is entirely specious, since the people of Iraq and Afghanistan have much better evidence of the brutality of American imperialism—their own eyes, and the experience of six and eight years respectively of murder, torture, arbitrary and lengthy imprisonment, all the panoply of colonial-style occupation.

The real aim in suppressing the torture photos is to avoid inflaming public opinion *in the United States*, and creating a groundswell of support for the trial and punishment of those government officials, in both the Bush and Obama administrations, who are responsible for the widespread abuse.

Another section of the massive bill declares, “None of the funds made available in this chapter may be made available for assistance to Hamas, or any entity effectively controlled by Hamas or any power-sharing government of which Hamas is a member.” Obama is given the power to authorize payment of US funds to a Palestinian government in which Hamas participates, providing he certifies to Congress that the Hamas officials in the government have accepted US dictates on recognition of Israel.

It is the core of the bill, the funding of the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, that is its most politically significant aspect. The bill declares: “Congress makes the following findings: (1) Over 40,000 American military personnel are currently serving in Afghanistan, with the bravery and professionalism consistent with the finest traditions of the United States Armed Forces, and are deserving of the strong support of all Americans.”

The Senate approved that language only days after the May 4 massacre of as many as 140 Afghan civilians, the bulk of them women and children, in the village of Bola Baluk in the western Farah province. Entire families were slaughtered when 2,000-pound bombs dropped by US jets leveled their homes.

The Senate bill is a blanket endorsement of the Obama administration’s escalation of the war in Afghanistan, and its extension into Pakistan. It appropriates money for three separate Pentagon slush funds to aid the military forces of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively, the first time that Pakistan has been included in the war zone on an equal footing. All US military aid funds outside the designated zone are routed through the State Department, not the Department of Defense.

Only hours after the passage of the bill, President Obama reiterated his commitment to expanding the US military and winning military victory in Afghanistan. In a speech to the commencement ceremony at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, he boasted of halting reductions in the Navy and building up the Marine Corps (the ground combat wing of the Navy).

In the key passage in the speech, he declared, “In short, we will maintain America’s military dominance and keep you the finest fighting force the world has ever seen.”

Obama praised the military as a model for the country, saying, “In a culture where so many chase the outward markers of success that can so often lead us astray—titles and status, materialism and money, fame and popularity—these Americans have embraced the virtues that we need most right now After an era when so many institutions and individuals acted with such greed and recklessness, it’s no wonder that our military remains the most trusted institution in our nation.”

In his first remarks on the subject, he paid tribute to the “extraordinary precision and professionalism” of the Navy SEALs who shot to death three teenage Somalis who had kidnapped the captain of a US cargo ship after a failing attempt to seize the ship last month.

Obama’s closing words were a chilling paean to military violence. He said, “these Americans did what they were trained to do. They remembered their skills. They did their duty. They performed their job. They stood their watch. They took their time and then they took their shot.”



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