

# Senate Democrats block funding for Guantánamo Bay closure

Tom Eley  
21 May 2009

In what the media has described as “a major rebuke” and “a potentially serious setback” to President Barack Obama, the US Senate voted 90-6 to withhold funds the White House had requested for shutting down the Guantánamo Bay prison camp at the US military base in Cuba. In a near total capitulation before the Republicans and the military-intelligence apparatus, only six Democrats voted in favor of the funding.

The vote followed a similar action by the US House of Representatives last week. The money for shutting Guantánamo, about \$80 million, would have been included in the \$91 billion supplemental war funding bill to continue military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. With the amendments, Congress voted to deny funding until the administration provides detailed plans for the fate of the prisoners.

On January 22, just after his inauguration, Obama issued an executive order to close the Guantánamo prison within one year. The order was part of Obama’s efforts to refurbish the American image abroad, which has come to be associated with prisoners cuffed and chained in orange jumpsuits. This order is now complicated by the Congressional vote.

The Senate vote came on the same day as testimony from Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Robert Mueller III. Mueller publicly repudiated the president and administration he nominally serves, warning in a Congressional hearing that it would be dangerous if the Guantánamo detainees were brought to the US, even if they were kept in maximum security prisons.

“The concerns we have about individuals who may support terrorism being in the United States run from concerns about providing financing, radicalizing others,” Mueller said, also mentioning “the potential for individuals undertaking attacks in the United States.”

This is absurd. In the first place, it is widely accepted that the vast majority of the remaining Guantánamo detainees are not even terrorists by Washington’s definition. The Obama

administration believes it can prosecute only forty or so of the remaining 240, even under the kangaroo-court tribunal system.

A large share had nothing to do with Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Even those with some affiliation to the Taliban are guilty only of the misfortune of having been in Afghanistan or under uniform when the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington took place.

Mueller’s testimony is part of a coordinated campaign by the military-intelligence apparatus—a campaign to which Obama and the Democratic Party as a whole are continuously adapting—to criticize the administration for being lax on “national security.”

The night before the vote, Senate Democrats, led by Senate Majority leader Harry Reid, said they would block the funding and publicly broke ranks with Obama. Reid told reporters “Democrats under no circumstances will move forward without a comprehensive, responsible plan from the president. We will never allow terrorists to be released into the United States.”

On Sunday, Democratic Senator James Webb of Virginia told a network news program that he believes Guantánamo should be left open. “We spent hundreds of millions of dollars building an appropriate facility with all security precautions on Guantánamo to try these cases,” he said. “I do not believe they should be tried in the United States.”

The Democratic chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii, proposed the amendment, calling it “a reality check” for Obama. The amendment “explicitly bars” special war funds “to transfer, release or incarcerate any of the Guantánamo detainees in the United States.”

Senate Republicans “taunted” the Democrats over their capitulation, according to the *Washington Post*. “I understand our friends on the other side of the aisle are—shall I say?—moving in our direction rapidly,” said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

Only last week, Reid and Senate Democrats had promised that they would provide funding for the Guantánamo

prison's closure. However, as the *Post* noted, "their resolve crumbled in the face of a concerted Republican campaign warning of dire consequences" for national security should the detainees be brought to US soil.

The Democrats' capitulation comes after several weeks of terror baiting from top Republicans and the media. In one example, Senator John Thune from South Dakota warned, "The American people don't want these men walking the streets of America's neighborhoods. The American people don't want these detainees held at a military base or federal prison in their backyard, either."

Behind the hysterical language lurks political calculation. The Republicans' aim is not so much to incite the American people but the military-intelligence apparatus, which is assuming an increasingly conspicuous role in the political life of the nation.

Republicans are well aware that the prisoners pose no threat to anyone. One of the concerns—shared by sections of the military-intelligence apparatus—is that any maneuver to process the prisoners in the US could be leveraged into new avenues of legal redress. This could further expose the entire edifice of lies that has been used to explain the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, and justify the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Pakistan.

Up until the Senate Democrats "revolted," to borrow a term from one media account, the White House had remained publicly committed to closing Guantánamo. On Tuesday, Gibbs reiterated that Obama would still seek the prison camp's closure. "There's been no change in the date," Gibbs said.

This posture may now change. Obama is set to give a speech Thursday in which he will outline his plans for the prisoners. For now unable to try, jail, or release the prisoners on US soil, Obama is further boxed in by the refusal of foreign states to accept the detainees. So far, only Britain and France have accepted a Guantánamo detainee—one each. Congress' move to block the prisoners from US soil—ostensibly because they are dangerous terrorists—will make new concessions from other nations even less likely.

On the same day as Obama's speech, former Vice President Dick Cheney is scheduled to discuss national security issues before the American Enterprise Institute. Cheney has led the campaign criticizing the administration for being "soft on terrorists."

On the contrary, in recent weeks Obama has measured every step to appease the military-intelligence apparatus and to defuse criticism from the right by pursuing the war on terror every bit as ruthlessly as the Bush administration.

Last week Obama announced he would resume military commission proceedings for a number of Guantánamo detainees. Administration sources held open the possibility

that these trials could be extended to new prisoners swept up in the global dragnet called the "war on terror." Among other changes to the system that prevailed under the Bush administration, these trials would likely have taken place on US military bases outside of Guantánamo.

Obama's decision to resume military commission trials was the latest in a string of decisions aimed to cultivate the military-intelligence apparatus, which has in recent weeks moved openly into the domestic political arena. In response to Obama's decision last month to publish a number of legal memos written by Bush administration attorneys justifying torture, Republican politicians and former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chiefs openly attacked the White House.

Obama then vowed there would be no hearings, investigations, or prosecutions of those who ordered or carried out torture. He followed that by moving to block the publication of dozens of photographs showing US military and intelligence personnel torturing prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan—after top generals voiced their disapproval. Then the CIA carried on a highly-public squabble with the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, exposing her early knowledge of the torture the agency carried out. This culminated in a speech by CIA Director Leon Panetta in which he asserted the nation is "at war" and that basic democratic principles and the enforcement of law, when placed in the balance against "national security," were no longer valid. (See "Panetta and Washington's endless war")

The differences between Obama and the Republicans over Guantánamo are entirely tactical. In keeping with the tenor of his administration, Obama aimed for a symbolic change that would have allowed the major anti-democratic characteristics of the war on terror to continue. That surface change focused on the prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, and would not have affected the major military prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But, much like the lords of Wall Street who will brook no limit on the accumulation of their personal fortunes, even as taxpayers bail out their banks to the tune of trillions, the generals and intelligence chiefs have now made clear they will tolerate no limitation on their prerogative, not even of the symbolic variety.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**