

US Congress approves another \$80 billion for Iraq, Afghanistan wars

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The Democratic-controlled Congress has once again approved funding for the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The latest supplemental appropriation bill to fund military operations in the two countries received final passage by the House of Representatives on Tuesday and by the Senate on Thursday. The House vote was 226-202, while the Senate vote was 91-5.

This was the 17th such war spending bill to be passed on an “emergency” basis since 2001. The Bush administration insisted on funding the wars through such supplemental bills, claiming that it was impossible to incorporate war spending into the regular federal budget because the course of the military conflicts was difficult to predict.

This practice served not only to insulate military spending from any budgetary constraints, but to lessen congressional scrutiny of the conduct of the two wars. The bills would normally come before the House and Senate with Pentagon and White House pressure to pass them quickly, under the threat (however contrived) that soldiers on the battlefield would otherwise be deprived of bullets, gasoline or food.

The Obama administration claims that the current “supplemental,” initially prepared by the Bush administration, will be the last. For the coming fiscal year, which begins October 1, spending on both wars will be incorporated into the regular Pentagon appropriations bill, which will accordingly swell by another \$130 billion over the level of the last Bush budget.

In addition to \$80 billion in funding for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2009 supplemental includes \$7.7 billion to fight the swine flu pandemic and \$5 billion to support new lending by the International Monetary Fund for countries—mainly in Eastern Europe

and the “Third World”—facing currency collapse in the ongoing world financial crisis.

The relative closeness of the House vote was the product of a chauvinist campaign by House Republicans, who denounced the IMF funding as a “bailout for the world,” as though the agency which enforces the dictates of Wall Street on poor countries was some sort of international welfare program. Only five Republicans voted for the bill.

This campaign put the supposedly antiwar elements in the Democratic caucus on the spot. Nearly 60 Democrats opposed the military supplemental bill when it first passed the House last month. If these 60 had continued to oppose the bill after the Senate added the IMF funding, the Republican opposition would have defeated the bill.

Accordingly, some two dozen of the “antiwar” wing of the Democratic Party switched their votes and supported spending another \$80 billion on Iraq and Afghanistan. Only 32 Democrats opposed the bill in Tuesday’s vote, a number just small enough to ensure the bill’s passage.

There is no doubt that if the five Republicans who voted for the bill had gone with the rest of their party, a corresponding number of Democrats would have been found willing to abandon the pretense of an antiwar stance to ensure that the Obama administration did not suffer an embarrassing congressional defeat.

One liberal Democrat, Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez of Chicago, expressed the hypocrisy and opportunism of the entire group. “I thought we needed to wrap up the wars,” he said, but switched his vote after a flight on Air Force One, when he was lobbied by Obama. “He said it was important for his administration not to lose momentum,” Gutierrez said.

There was also wrangling in the House over demands

by Republicans, and many Democrats, for a legislative prohibition on the release of photographs of prisoners subjected to torture by military and CIA interrogators at US prisons in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantánamo Bay. The provision was added by the Senate, but then removed from the final bill approved by a House-Senate conference after a group of 50 House Democrats threatened to torpedo the supplemental bill.

Senate supporters of the torture cover-up were mollified by a pledge by the White House, expressed in a personal letter from President Obama, assuring them that he would do everything possible through executive orders to block any release of the torture photos.

One other issue related to the ongoing “war on terror” threatened to derail the bill. The Senate had prohibited the transfer of Guantánamo prisoners to the United States. A compromise between the House and Senate means that prisoners can be brought to American soil for trial, but not for release if they are acquitted or for incarceration if they are found guilty. The ban has only limited practical effect, since it expires along with the supplemental appropriation on September 30.

The final bill pays lip service to the antiwar opinion of a large majority of the American people, requiring the secretary of defense to submit an “exit plan” by the end of this year for US military operations in Afghanistan, and semi-annual progress reports thereafter. This provision will have no effect whatsoever on the escalation of the war ordered by Obama and already under way.

The congressional action insures that the toll of Afghan civilians killed or wounded by the US military will continue to rise, as the Obama administration increases the American troop presence to close to 70,000. Casualties in the nearly eight-year US military occupation have already risen sharply in recent months. Last month, US bombs killed 140 civilians in western Afghanistan.

In the Senate, only one Democrat, Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, and independent Bernard Sanders of Vermont, who caucuses with the Democrats, voted against the war funding bill. Supposedly antiwar liberals like Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Tom Harkin of Iowa, John Kerry of Massachusetts and Barbara Boxer of California joined in the pro-war vote.

In comments typical of the apologetics of the Senate liberals, Boxer justified her pro-war vote by declaring

her faith in Obama. “I do not like everything in this bill,” she said. “I am not going to be an open checkbook for another war. But I believe this administration gets it.”

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada made a floor speech denouncing Republican opposition to the supplemental—although it was limited to the House—in stridently patriotic terms. “This bill also contains our commitment to strengthening our military, rebuilding our relationships with key allies around the world and reducing key security threats,” Reid said. “Rather than restoring our standing in the world, some Republicans are standing in the way.”

While there was no significant argument against the war, the Senate engaged in an angry dispute over adding \$1 billion for a “cash for clunkers” program, an effort to stimulate US auto sales by providing subsidies of up to \$4,500 for those who trade in an old vehicle for a new and more energy-efficient model. This provision outraged Republican “free market” principles, and the 60 votes required to approve the measure were barely found, with four Republicans joining 56 Democrats.



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