

Midterms: A Modest Change, Maybe

By John Isaacs | November 1, 2006

While the November 7 midterm election will doubtless change the atmospherics in Washington, DC, it is unlikely to have a significant impact on national security policy. Despite the fact that the disastrous Iraq War has played a dominant role in the election, there is little reason to expect President George W. Bush to agree to major policy shifts in 2007 on Iraq or on other challenging issues such as Iran, North Korea, a Mideast peace process, the struggle against terrorists, and nuclear nonproliferation.

Yet it is possible that the administration could change course on Iraq—though it might require a perfect storm of events.

At this juncture several days before the election, the prevailing wisdom is that anti-Republican feeling will sweep out many Republicans and turn control of the House of Representatives to the Democrats. The outlook for the Senate is less certain, but Republicans are likely to retain narrow control even with a Democratic pickup of three to five seats.

Some hardline Republican conservatives such as Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA), who “discovered” weapons of mass destruction in Iraq when no one else could, and leading missile defense advocate and House Armed Services Committee member Rep. Curt Weldon (R-PA), may be forced into involuntary retirement. If Republicans do lose control of the House, the entire House leadership team now led by Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) may be ousted.

House Democrats who have spent 12 years in the wilderness would then rise to power. Rep. John Murtha (D-PA), whose surprise opposition to the Iraq War was a major turning point in American politics, would chair the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, and Rep. Ike Skelton (D-MO) would take charge of the House Armed Services Committee.

In examining the dynamics of the election, the failed war in Iraq more than anything else has damaged President’s Bush image as a leader and

undercut the Republican Party. A *Washington Post* poll released October 10 found that 64% of Americans disapproved of the war, and 63% said the war was not worth fighting. An Associated Press poll released on October 27 showed that nine in ten likely voters say Iraq is a very or extremely important issue for the campaign.

Other factors have affected the electorate’s mood. Historically, six years into an incumbent president’s time in office, the public tends to turn against the party in power. The scandals over disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff and more recently Rep. Mark Foley’s (R-FL) contacts with underage pages have added to Republican woes.

Other controversies in the past two years have hurt the GOP: high gas prices, the administration’s sluggish response to Hurricane Katrina, the ballooning federal budget deficit, and an economy that is humming at high speed for the wealthy while leaving the middle class and poor behind.

So why, in light of widespread disapproval of the current policy in Iraq, along with significant Democratic gains, should one not expect to see a dramatic change in national security policy? There are a number of reasons for this disconnect.

First, even if Democrats do take over control the House by a substantial margin, they will either fall short in the Senate or hold a slim majority. Because of Senate rules, it usually takes 60 votes to pass legislation, necessitating votes from both parties. Thus

Democratic gains will leave them well short of dominance. Senators Harry Reid (D-NV), Carl Levin (D-MI), Jack Reed (D-RI), and Joseph Biden (D-DE) will have enhanced power on national security, but will still need many Republican votes to enact change. Sen. John Warner (R-VA) will still have a major say over security issues whether he remains chairman or a ranking member on the Armed Services Committee; so too will Sen. John McCain (R-AZ).

Second, many of the new Democrats who are expected to be elected are centrists, not staunch liberals. The chief Democratic strategists, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY) and Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-IL), encouraged moderate-to-conservative Democrats to enter races in “red” states and districts to improve chances of success.

Democrat Bob Casey, who is challenging incumbent Santorum in Pennsylvania, was pushed ahead of a more liberal candidate. Casey is hardly a leftist; he is pro-gun, anti-abortion, and has refused to call for a troop withdrawal from Iraq. Rep. Harold Ford (D-TN), who is running for Senate in the open Tennessee seat against Republican Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker, has taken a number of conservative stands and voted in 2002 to authorize Bush to use force in Iraq. But the Democratic candidate with the ultimate hawkish background is Chris Carney, who is running for a House seat in Pennsylvania against scandal-plagued Rep. Don Sherwood (R-PA). Carney, a naval reservist and political science professor, helped develop intelligence briefings for Douglas Feith in the Pentagon during the run-up to the war. (In an ironic twist, Republicans ran television ads attacking Carney for helping to launch a failed Iraq War.)

Third, and perhaps most importantly, national security decisions remain largely in the hands of the president. Congress can complain, deliver speeches, hold hearings, and launch investigations, but it is very unlikely to cut off funding for the Iraq War— particularly when Democrats cannot agree on an alternative policy. And a Democrat-controlled Congress is very unlikely to block the administration’s neoconservatives if they succeed in

persuading Bush to launch a military strike against Iran. Members of Congress can urge Bush to negotiate directly with the North Koreans or the Syrians, take an activist position on an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, or adopt a smarter policy to cope with terrorists, but they cannot force him to do so. And rather than cut the military budget, Democrats would probably back an increase to cover the costs of a larger military force.

For many decades, Congress has been reluctant to overturn major presidential foreign policy initiatives, the rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty being the unfortunate exception. Since World War II, Congress has abdicated its constitutional authority to declare war. During the Clinton administration, many Republicans opposed American military involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo, but Congress did not withhold funds.

Congress can sometimes affect policy on the margins, as McCain demonstrated with his partial legislative success to ban torture. More typical was a congressional law passed in 2006 prodding Bush to establish a “czar” for North Korean policy; while it is a commendable policy, the Bush administration is likely to ignore it.

So, you may ask, if they are unable to institute real changes, what difference would it make if Democrats take a share of power in this election?

There may be important changes on domestic policy. House Democratic leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) has vowed legislative action on several issues on which there is widespread Democratic consensus: minimum wage, making college tuitions tax deductible, permitting the government to negotiate directly with drug companies for lower prices for seniors, and repealing corporate incentives to move jobs overseas. The only early priority for House Democrats that touches on national security is a pledge to implement the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, including giving greater focus to nuclear nonproliferation.

Some Republicans may go along with these priorities, but a closely divided Senate or a presidential veto could stop each of these issues in its tracks.

If Democrats are reluctant to use the power of the purse to force change, they will be eager to use the power of hearings and subpoenas to put a spotlight on the inadequacies of Bush's national security policy. Democratic chairs of key committees can use this position to influence policy. With this newfound control, Democrats can hold hearings of their choosing and conduct investigations into contractor overcharges and flaws in the execution of Iraq policy.

Should the Democrats take control of the House, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) is expected to chair the Committee on Government Reform, the House's main investigative committee. This would put Waxman in a terrific position to look into corruption in Iraq contracts and other misdeeds and to issue subpoenas to investigate Bush administration misconduct. Murtha and Skelton would likely enjoy similar oversight responsibilities.

The power to persuade turns traditional political science theory on its head. Since the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt at the beginning of the 20th century, the president has utilized a "bully pulpit," meaning a terrific platform from which to persuasively advocate an agenda.

But Congress has found a way to influence the conduct of the president's policies short of passing legislation: it has its own bully pulpit. Through hearings, speeches, questions directed to the executive branch, press releases, and investigations, Congress can build pressure on a president to take a certain course of action. The president can choose to ignore Congress, as Bush has done for six years, but there may be serious political consequences.

Does this mean the struggle to bring American troops home from Iraq is hopeless until a new president takes office in 2009? Not necessarily.

A confluence of specific events could place strong pressure on Bush to reverse course in Iraq. The Iraq Study Group, a high-level commission headed by former Republican consigliere James Baker and former Indiana Rep. Lee Hamilton, will issue a report in December or January laying out new recommendations for the conduct of the war. Though it is not yet clear what the group will propose, Baker has offered hints. "Our commission believes that there are alternatives between the stated alternatives, the ones that are out there in the political debate, of stay the course and cut and run," he recently said.

If the Baker-Hamilton report suggests beginning a phased withdrawal from Iraq combined with some new deadlines, the commission's report could become the rallying point for Republicans disaffected from the war and Democrats split on how to proceed.

The influence of the report will be amplified by the election results. If they lose big, Republicans are likely to see the Iraq War as a major reason and to press for changes in policy. Biden reported that a dozen Republican senators have told him privately that they agree on the need to change course in Iraq but would say nothing publicly before the election. With a nervous eye toward the 2008 election, Republicans will worry about further damage to the party if the war continues. Conservative commentator George Will wrote in the October 22 *Washington Post*: "If in January 2009 more than 100,000 U.S. forces remain in Iraq, there might be 100 fewer Republicans in Congress. So 'stay the course' is a policy stamped with an expiration date."

Democrats who have been reluctant to tackle national security issues in 2002 and 2004 have been emboldened by their success in declaring the war a failure. Democrats have put their money where their ideology is: an October report by Campaign Media Analysis Group found that Democrats ran ads mentioning Iraq 46,402 times at a cost of at least \$41.6 million.

This perfect storm of Republican fears, Democratic confidence, and the Baker-Hamilton commission

providing cover for members of both parties could be a powerful force acting on the president. “The American people are going to have a referendum on Iraq and his whole security plan,” Biden told CNN’s *Late Edition* on October 29. “It’s going to determine what happens in the next two years. If it turns out that they repudiate the president’s judgment, then I think you’re going to see a bipartisan effort that flows from that, putting pressure on the administration to make a significant change in its policy.”

Will Bush listen? He has proved to be a stubborn man reinforced by religion and strong ideological

conviction. In the weeks before the election, he continued to maintain that the war is going well. “Absolutely, we’re winning,” Bush said at an October 25 press conference. Despite this seeming inability to change course, the post-election period will be the best chance for a reversal of course on Iraq since 2002.

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