

Year in Review: Congress Weak on National Security

By John Isaacs | December 28, 2006

When Congress slunk out of town early the morning of Saturday, December 9, it left behind a mixed record on national security issues. On some of the larger issues facing the United States, Congress was either silent or continued to give carte blanche to the White House. There were a number of modest victories on relatively narrow issues, but there were also some notable failures.

If Congress were graded for its national security work during 2006, it would receive an incomplete.

For the past year, the neoconservatives' dream war in Iraq to establish a reliable Middle East redoubt has turned into a nightmare, a civil war for the Iraqis and a quagmire for the United States. American public opinion has turned largely against the war, with 70% of the public opposed to it. The 2006 midterm elections illustrated Iraq's damaging political consequences for Republican candidates.

Even some of the neoconservatives who had promoted the war back in 2002 lost some of their enthusiasm. "As Iraq slips further into chaos, the war's neoconservative boosters have turned sharply on the Bush administration, charging that their grand designs have been undermined by White House incompetence," wrote David Rose in a November *Vanity Fair* article. "In a series of exclusive interviews, Richard Perle, Kenneth Adelman, David Frum, and others play the blame game with shocking frankness. Target No. 1: the president himself."

In the fourth year of the messy Iraq War, many of the establishment elite turned pessimistic. "Military victory is no longer possible in Iraq," said former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in a November 19 BBC television interview. The Baker-Hamilton Commission, also known as the Iraq Study Group, which consisted of 10 highly esteemed members of the U.S. political establishment, ultimately concluded: "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating."

Despite the newfound trepidation and criticism over Iraq, members of Congress have been slow to respond. For the most part, they continued to blindly support the war—principally the Republicans, but also a number of Democrats, who at best talked about "changing course" without offering any suggestions on what a new course should be. Many portrayed talk of withdrawal as a betrayal of U.S. values and a disservice to troops in Iraq.

In a June 22, 2006 Senate vote, only one Republican, Rhode Island's Sen. Lincoln Chafee, was willing to join 38 Democrats in supporting an amendment (from Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI) and Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI)) to begin withdrawal of troops from Iraq without an end date. A mere 13 Senate Democrats—and no Republicans—were willing to vote the same day for an amendment sponsored by Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) that demanded complete withdrawal by mid-2007.

In the House, Republicans continued their imperious ways and refused to allow a vote on troop withdrawal. Instead, they put forward a resolution endorsing the mission in Iraq, opposing a withdrawal date, and declaring that the United States will prevail in the "Global War on Terror." The resolution was adopted 256-153 on June 16, 2006.

Efforts to cut off funding for the war did not even get to first base. Indeed, military spending continued to skyrocket upward. Congress approved a \$462.8 billion Defense Authorization bill for fiscal 2007, plus \$70 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, it overwhelmingly

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endorsed a \$94.5 billion supplemental spending request for fiscal 2006 to pay for the wars on the two fronts. The furthest that Congress was willing to go was to bar spending on permanent military bases in Iraq.

Aside from the disaster in Iraq, the United States faces dicey challenges in a failing war in Afghanistan and the ongoing nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea. While some members of Congress spoke of the need to divert attention and resources to Afghanistan and others talked about negotiating with Iran and North Korea, Congress largely left these volatile issues to the president.

There are fears that the neoconservatives and the pro-Israeli lobby will prod the president into a military attack on Iran in 2007. Congress, which has abdicated the power to declare war since 1941, was largely mute on the issue. New York Democratic Rep. Maurice Hinchey tried to bar funding for an attack on Iran without prior congressional approval, but lost handily 262-158 on June 20.

A Senate measure offered on June 15, 2006 by Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Rick Santorum (who subsequently lost his bid for reelection) that endorsed tough sanctions on Iran while encouraging regime change there was rebuffed 53-46, after Delaware Democratic Sen. Joseph Biden led a Senate floor fight against it. Later in the session, however, Congress voted to renew unilateral sanctions on Iran, although providing the administration some flexibility to waive the sanctions.

Congress also adopted an amendment to establish an executive branch position of "senior North Korea policy coordinator," but it does not appear that the appointment will be made any time soon.

Other negative news from 2006 included the U.S.-India nuclear deal, which sailed through Congress with few dissenting votes, permitting a change in decades-old U.S. nonproliferation laws to make an exception for India. The deal was promoted by U.S. business interests, the Indian-American lobby, the Bush administration, the Indian government, and

conservatives who see India as a counterweight to China. Few members of Congress were willing to challenge the deal on the very reasonable grounds that it would undermine U.S. efforts to stem the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The House overwhelmingly approved the deal by a vote of 359-68 on July 26 after rejecting several amendments to limit risks to global nonproliferation standards. The Senate enthusiastically concurred in a November 16 vote of 85-12, in which amendments to improve the deal again went down in flames. Both houses of Congress cleared the final conference report on the deal in the waning hours of the last 2006 session.

This year Congress also accepted the costly national missile defense system, despite the Pentagon's failure to prove it will work effectively and reliably in real world conditions, including overcoming decoys and countermeasures. An amendment offered in the House on May 11 by Rep. John Tierney (D-MA) and Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ) to cut \$4.7 billion out of the roughly \$10 billion program was brushed aside by a vote of 301-124. The Senate never voted on the issue.

Despite these setbacks, Congress was not a total washout in 2006. On the positive side, it refused to approve the nomination of John Bolton to be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Bolton's nomination almost returned from the dead. In 2005, he received a temporary recess appointment from the president because the Senate refused to approve his nomination, which was scheduled to expire at the end of 2006. In something of a surprise, Ohio Republican Sen. George Voinovich, who previously opposed the nomination, reversed course and said he would vote to confirm Bolton if there were a new Senate vote.

That new vote almost occurred in September, but a hearing to begin the process anew was derailed at the request of Senator Chafee. A last-gasp, post-midterms administration effort to get a vote failed when Chafee and Biden, the incoming Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, vowed to

block it. The long, dogged fight against Bolton finally prevailed.

There were other high notes in 2006. One of the less-publicized brainstorms of this administration got short shrift. The Pentagon, looking for uses for its very costly Trident nuclear submarine force, decided that replacing some of the nuclear warheads onboard with conventional bombs was a splendid idea. The rationale for the plan is that while nuclear weapons have very little military use today, a more usable conventional warhead could speed to its target in a matter of minutes to destroy terrorist camps or other high-value sites. Replacing nuclear warheads with conventional ones is a good idea, but the problem, of course, is that Russia or China might have a hard time determining which kind an incoming Trident-launched warhead was carrying. Mixing the nuclear with the conventional could easily increase the risk of an accidental, miscalculated, or unauthorized launch of a nuclear weapon.

This was probably a major reason why the final Senate Defense Appropriations bill denied most of the \$127 million requested for placing conventional warheads on the Trident submarine. The decision was undoubtedly bolstered when an amendment from Alabama Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions that challenged a similar decision by the Senate Armed Services Committee failed 67-31 on August 3.

Congress gave a small funding boost to nuclear non-proliferation programs, although the final results are uncertain. There are two primary nonproliferation spending programs. The first, a Pentagon program known as Cooperative Threat Reduction (also frequently called the Nunn-Lugar program, after the original sponsors), received a static \$372 million.

The second, a program within the Department of Energy called the Global Threat Reduction Initiative that seeks to secure nuclear materials in civilian reactors, was boosted above the administration's request for \$106 million. A bipartisan amendment offered by Rep. Rob Andrews (D-NJ) and Rep. Jim Leach (R-IA) adding \$27.8 million was approved

227-195 on May 24, bringing the total House-approved increase to \$41 million. The Senate added an additional \$10 million.

That victory may prove pyrrhic. Congress failed to complete action on the Energy and Water Appropriations bill (and most of the other appropriations bills), so the Global Threat Reduction program is likely to remain funded at last year's level of \$97 million. (Congress is expected to apply a formula that continues spending for programs in bills that were not completed by the end of the 109th Congress at the fiscal 2006 level of funding.)

Congress' failure to pass the Energy Appropriations bill could actually prove beneficial to opponents of building new nuclear weapons. The Senate and House increased funding in line with administration requests for a new nuclear project called the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program. Ohio Republican Rep. David Hobson, who almost singled-handedly deep-sixed the administration request for a nuclear bunker-buster weapon in previous years, this year championed the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program, which in theory could build replacement warheads without resorting to nuclear explosive testing. However, without a new appropriations bill, the program is likely to revert to last year's spending level of \$25 million.

There was another backhanded win in 2006 that is worth mentioning. The administration requested an increase in the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership from \$80 million last year to \$250 million this year to "recycle" plutonium contained in nuclear waste from nuclear power plants. The administration plans to build a full-scale commercial reprocessing plant and fast reactor that would separate nuclear waste material that could be used to make nuclear weapons. Critics say this would weaken efforts to prevent other countries from doing the same and would make it easier for other nations to acquire bomb-grade material. This would in turn increase terrorists' opportunities to steal or divert bomb-grade material. The Senate appeared headed to fund the full \$250 million; the House approved \$120 million. An amendment from Rep. Ed Markey

(D-MA) to cut another \$40 million from the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership lost 295-128. But again, due to the ineptitude of the Republican majority and its inability to pass appropriation bills, the program is likely to stay at \$80 million for fiscal 2007.

In short, the 109th Congress adjourned to the relief of many who were less than thrilled by its performance on both domestic and national security issues. U.S. voters rendered a verdict by turning Congress

over to the Democrats in the November 7 midterm elections. Unfortunately, there is scant evidence that the next Congress will be much more effective in the national security realm, even with a new set of sheriffs in town.

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