

## **A Look at the 110th Congress**

**By John Isaacs | January 18, 2007**

When the 110th Congress was sworn in on January 4, a new cast took charge, making very complicated dynamics the rule for the next two years. Although Democrats will set the agenda for legislation considered on the Senate and House floors and will chair the committees in both chambers, they will not dominate the new Congress.

On the other hand, the first significant votes in the new Congress suggest a breakdown in the Republican lockstep unity that largely prevailed in the House for the past 12 years and to a lesser extent in the Senate.

The Democrats' 51-49 majority in the Senate is well short of the 60 votes needed to overcome frequent Senate filibusters. Moreover, the 51 votes include that of President George W. Bush's favorite "Democrat," Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT). Lieberman highlighted the holiday season with a December 29 *Washington Post* op-ed endorsing a troop increase in Iraq and signing the piece as an "Independent Democrat." On January 5, he joined Iraq troop escalation advocate Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) in a journey to the American Enterprise Institute, the headquarters from which ideas supporting a massive troop surge have flowed. And on January 10, when Bush delivered his nationwide address defending the troop escalation, he mentioned Lieberman as his strong ally.

Yet Lieberman was not the Democrat with the most hawkish record in the last Congress; that dubious honor goes to Sen. Ben Nelson (D-NE). In the Council for a Livable World's 2005-2006 Senate voting record, Nelson voted in favor of arms control positions only 16% of the time.

Lieberman's voting record aligned against hawks' interests 33% of the time.

Several of the new Democrats elected to the Senate in 2006 are definitely in the moderate camp, including Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA), Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA). The new Senate majority could also potentially miss the progressive, but very ill, Sen. Tim Johnson (D-SD). Similarly, a significant portion of the Democrats elected to the House fall into the moderate camp, including Rep. Chris Carney (D-PA), Rep. Brad Ellsworth (D-IN), Rep. Heath Shuler (D-NC), and Rep. Charlie Wilson (D-OH).

Carney is a particularly interesting example. A lieutenant commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve, Carney served multiple tours overseas and was activated for operations Enduring Freedom and Noble Eagle. In early 2002, Carney worked in an intelligence unit created by Douglas J. Feith, then the undersecretary of defense for policy, to search for links between terrorist groups and Iraq—a link that has been widely disputed since that time. In a November 28, 2006 article, Carney described himself as "probably to the right" of most House Democrats on Iraq. During his campaign, Carney received help from the left, Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL), and the right, Richard Perle, a

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leading Bush administration advocate of war with Iraq. The *New York Times* reported that immediately after the election, Feith called to congratulate him. “He’s a talented, intelligent person,” Feith said.

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There remains a small group of moderate Republicans, including Maine’s Sen. Olympia Snowe and Sen. Susan Collins, Oregon’s Sen. Gordon Smith, and Pennsylvania’s Sen. Arlen Specter. But the era of the “Rockefeller Republican,” which dominated the Republican Party for years, is long gone, and conservatives hold sway among Senate Republicans. Top Republican leaders were unsurprisingly hawkish: Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY) scored 8% on the Council for a Livable World’s voting record (he supported hawkish positions only once out of 12 votes), while Sen. Trent Lott (R-MS) finished with 16% (twice out of 12 votes), and Sen. John Kyl (R-AZ) scored an underwhelming 0%.

The only national security issue that can be expected to produce a broad left-right coalition is opposition to the Iraq War. As objections mounted to Bush’s policy to escalate the war in Iraq with more than 20,000 troops, it appeared that a bipartisan Senate majority could be cobbled together in opposition to the president’s war plans. A Senate vote expressing disapproval of the move might come as early as this week.

While the House Democratic majority is wider at 233-202, the prospects of some Democrats breaking rank and of a strong conservative Republican role are at least as great. After the 2006 elections, the small band of Republican moderates—who had been more moderate in name than in voting—is still smaller. Rep. Chris Shays (R-CT) is the only Republican left in the entire New England region after the defeat of two New Hampshire Republicans and two Connecticut Republicans.

While former House Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-TX) is gone and Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) is no longer in the leadership, their successors, Rep. John Boehner (R-OH) and Rep. Roy Blunt (R-MO), are equally conservative.

But the whip hand of Republican conservatives has diminished after losing control of the House. In the first days of the new House session, Democrats put forward a series of votes on issues that united their party—and surprisingly succeeded in winning support from a substantial block of Republicans.

On January 9, the House passed a bill implementing the as-of-yet unpassed recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. The bill urges increased effectiveness of U.S. nonproliferation programs, including the Cooperative Threat

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Reduction Program, the Global Threat Reduction Initiative, and the Proliferation Security Initiative, but it does not provide any actual funding for these programs. It does, however, call for a nonproliferation czar within the executive branch and eliminates some of the conditions that hinder effective implementation of nonproliferation programs.

Not surprisingly, Democrats endorsed the measure by a unanimous 231-0 vote (with two absences). More surprisingly, 68 Republicans voted for the package, which was adopted 299-128.

This vote was the only one in the first 10 days that touched on national security issues. The other early House votes were passage of a higher minimum wage (endorsed overwhelmingly 315-116, including 82 Republicans) expanded stem cell research (adopted by a 253-174 vote, with 37 Republicans in favor), and authority for the government to negotiate lower Medicare drug prices (approved 255-170, with 24 Republicans voting for it).

While this suggests that the Democratic leadership shrewdly picked the first few issues on which to vote, it also makes clear that with Republicans no longer maintaining tight control of the House, they are less likely to vote almost 100% along party lines.

These splits have implications for later votes on the Iraq War—and perhaps other votes on national security issues such as the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program, Guantanamo Bay detainees, and nonproliferation funding.

For Democrats, there will be more testing of party coalitions and unity after the House disposes of the first six popular issues promised

by Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and the Democratic leadership in the so-called first 100 hours of the new Congress. The administration's approximately \$100 billion Supplemental Appropriations request to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, expected to be sent to Congress in February, will provide an interesting test, as will the annual Budget Resolution.

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Tensions between the larger liberal Democratic block in the House and the more moderate block of “blue dog Democrats” simmered early in the session. Part of that was played out in the early leadership fight between newly elected Speaker Pelosi and House Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD) regarding the position of House Majority Leader. Pelosi supported her longtime ally and anti-war critic but otherwise conservative Rep. John Murtha (D-PA) for the position, while others supported the more traditionally moderate Hoyer. But when push came to vote, Hoyer won handily, 149-86.

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The next two years will test the unity of both the Democrats and the Republicans. House Democratic leadership will struggle to accommodate the more moderate elements of the party, while also appeasing the more liberal camps. Senate Democrats, on the other hand, will try to accommodate Republicans in order to prevent them from blocking their initiatives, for fear of becoming a do-nothing Congress like their predecessors. Conversely, Republican leadership will repeatedly try to demonstrate their

coherence and resolve, as droves of Republicans in both the House and the Senate fight to show their newfound independence from the incredibly unpopular President Bush. Aside from solidarity on Iraq, it has yet to be seen whether either party will accomplish any of those tasks.

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