

The Political War Over the Iraq War

By John Isaacs | May 30, 2007

On May 24, Congress gave overwhelming approval to the Supplemental Appropriations Bill, which approves about \$100 billion to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While earlier versions contained timetables for the withdrawal of most U.S. troops from Iraq, the bill that was sent to President George W. Bush for his signature contained only weak benchmarks or standards for the Iraqi government to meet in order to receive civilian reconstruction aid, which the president could ultimately waive anyway.

On its face, the bill appears to be a shattering loss for the anti-war forces that have been working to end U.S. involvement in a war that has entered its fifth year and is claiming ever more American and Iraqi lives and hundreds of billions of dollars.

But was it really a major defeat—or could it be instead a simple temporary setback?

Did the Democratic leadership cave in to Bush by giving him a blank check to continue the wars—or have Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) successfully organized a forceful challenge to the war policies, despite narrow majorities in both chambers?

Did the country witness abject surrender by Democrats comparable to Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Germany—or is a more apt historical analogy the U.S. loss of the Philippines to the Japanese at the onset of World War II, which was reversed on the way to an overwhelming victory?

Most anti-war activists and progressive bloggers are saying that congressional Democrats disregarded the will of the voters and caved in to the president. Former Rep. Tom Andrews (D-ME), now the national director of Win Without War, said: "Nowhere in this bill is a compromise; it is a complete capitulation to a failed president. Republicans and some Democrats are obstructing the will of the American people." Leftie political blogger David Sirota wrote on May 24: "Today America watched a Democratic Party kick them square in the teeth—all in order to

continue the most unpopular war in a generation at the request of the most unpopular president in a generation at a time polls show a larger percentage of the public thinks America is going in the wrong direction than ever recorded in polling history" (DavidSirota.com). Anti-war Sen. Russell Feingold (D-WI) added his voice to the uproar on May 22: "I cannot support a bill that contains nothing more than toothless benchmarks and that allows the president to continue what may be the greatest foreign policy blunder in our nation's history."

Yet other voices suggested a more nuanced view of events. Columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. declared in the May 25 *Washington Post*: "The decision to drop withdrawal timelines from the Iraq supplemental appropriations bill is not a decisive defeat. It is a temporary setback in a much longer struggle for minds and votes that the administration's critics are actually winning."

Rick Klein laid out the situation on May 29: "On Iraq, Bush's victory on war funding masks an uncomfortable political reality for the president: the war is growing more unpopular by the day, and all signs point to a September date by which the GOP will be fed up" (ABCNews.com, May 29).

Not surprisingly, suggestions pointing to a fall showdown have been denounced by critics for ignoring the fact that between now and September, many more American soldiers and ordinary Iraqis will die or be injured in Iraq's raging civil war. At the same

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time, a number of liberal members of Congress argue that it is immoral to vote for a single dollar more for the disastrous war.

Anti-war activists ardently wanted the war to end immediately after the November 2006 elections, in which many victorious Democrats felt they had a mandate to do just that. It is true that the election results demonstrated clear opposition to the war and a demand for a changed policy. However, American voters then and now are of mixed minds about how the United States should exit Iraq.

Evidence of these mixed public views came in a *New York Times*/CBS News poll that was released May 25. According to the poll, Americans overwhelmingly disapprove of Bush's handling of the war by a 50-point margin—73% to 23%—and 76% of respondents said they think the war is going badly. At the same time, although Americans support a timetable for withdrawal, only 13% would block all funding for the war.

Moreover, while elections have consequences, they usually don't produce immediate policy changes. The 1932 election that swept in Franklin D. Roosevelt and an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress led to dramatic change in governmental policy to combat the Depression. And the 1964 landslide that elected President Lyndon B. Johnson led to a domestic "Great Society" program that had been pent-up since the conservative coalition dominated Congress from 1938 on.

But these are the exceptions. Most elections produce far-reaching change only over time.

The 2006 election brought only a narrow 15-vote Democratic majority to the House of Representatives, and that includes a broad spectrum of opinion, from "Get Out of Iraq Now" Democrats on the far left to more conservative Blue Dog Democrats on the right.

In the Senate, the situation is even more tenuous; the 51–49 Democratic majority includes pro-war Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) and the convalescing

Sen. Tim Johnson (D-SD). The majority also includes some like Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA), who has been highly critical of the Iraq War but refused to vote against war funds or for a hard deadline for troop withdrawal.

Seen in this context, House Speaker Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Sen. Harry Reid have done a remarkable job of unifying Democrats and a handful of Republicans against the war in a carefully calculated strategy that has kept a constant political focus on the war through a series of votes that began in January and have continued for five months.

First, both chambers of Congress produced majorities (including for the first time some Republican support) for non-binding resolutions opposing the Bush administration's January 10 "surge" plan to send more troops to Iraq.

Then, on March 23, after an intense effort by the House Democratic leadership, the House approved, by a narrow 218–212 vote, an earlier version of the Supplemental Appropriations Bill to pay for the war with a provision requiring the withdrawal of most U.S. troops by August 2008. More miraculously, four days later Reid produced a 50–48 margin to retain language mandating the commencement of a troop withdrawal within 120 days with the goal of completing the withdrawal by March 2008. That majority included Feingold on the left and Sen. Ben Nelson (D-NE) on the right, plus two Republicans.

After Bush vetoed the first version of the supplemental bill, Congress persevered by adding new provisions that drew more veto threats. Anti-war activists also got their cleanest shots at ending the war: 171 House members, including 74% of House Democrats present and voting, supported a bill by Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) to withdraw most troops from Iraq within 180 days, while 29 senators voted for a Feingold-Reid amendment to complete the withdrawal of most troops by March 2008. The Feingold-Reid amendment was supported by the Senate Democratic leadership and all the Senate Democratic candidates for president.

With the Memorial Day recess approaching and a new veto threat hanging over the legislation, congressional leaders conceded this round with promises to bring up more anti-war legislation in June (the Defense Authorization Bill in the Senate), July (the Defense Appropriations Bill if amendments are permitted) and September (a new Supplemental Appropriations Bill).

During the May 24 debate, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Rep. David Obey (D-WI) discussed the problem at hand: "We are not giving up. We are simply recognizing that no one believes that it is possible, given the Senate's inability to produce 60 votes to shut down debate, to change course during the remainder of this fiscal year. That may not be a pleasant fact, but it is a reality."

The troop withdrawal date was scrapped. So what exactly has been accomplished up to this point in the debate?

First, Congress has kept the pressure on Bush to change policy after four years of blank checks from the Republican-controlled Congress. There have been more than 20 Iraq-related votes in committees or the Senate and House floors, keeping a constant focus on the war. Bush has been forced on the defensive over a failed war and has already made some concessions, albeit modest ones, to that pressure.

Second, Pelosi and Reid have unified most of their fractious caucuses for legislation to begin troop withdrawal from Iraq. They have kept their eye on the key legislative numbers: 218 votes in the House and 60 in the Senate to approve a timetable for withdrawal, and a two-thirds majority needed to overcome a presidential veto.

Third, Democrats have put the squeeze on congressional Republicans, many of whom have expressed misgivings about the war but have not yet worked up the courage to vote against their president and the war. A number of Republicans lost in 2006 because of the Iraq War. As the November 2008 elections approach, Republicans will increasingly be

tempted to abandon their support for a failed war. In the meantime, they have established a consistent record of voting for the war time after time.

Congressional Republicans are clearly squirming. On May 16, most Senate Republicans supported an amendment put forth by Sen. John Warner (R-VA) to tie economic aid to Iraq to that government's progress on disarming militias, producing a unity government, and equitably distributing oil revenues. The next day, Los Angeles Times reporter Noam Levey wrote: "The vote Wednesday marked the first time a majority of Republicans backed any condition on Bush's management of the 4-year-old war."

For many of these Republicans, voting for the Warner approach may be a way-station to voting against the war come this fall. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) talked of the need to reexamine the war if the troop buildup fails to stabilize the situation and the Iraqi government continues to stumble (Congress Daily AM, May 8). Similarly, Senate Republican Whip Trent Lott (R-MS) suggested that the president has until the fall to show results (Associated Press, May 8). House Republican leader John Boehner (R-OH) told Fox News Sunday on May 7: "By the time we get to September or October, members are going to want to know how well this is working, and if it isn't, what's Plan B."

There are other indications of Republican turmoil. On May 9, a group of a dozen or more moderate House Republicans met with Bush at his private quarters to issue a blunt warning that if war conditions don't improve by the fall, many Republicans may desert him on the war.

Other events may conspire to turn Republicans against the war. Many GOPers protested loudly the Iraqi Parliament's plan to take a two-month vacation this summer. Is this vacation truly important in the grand scheme of things? No, but for many Republicans, it has crystallized unhappiness with the Iraqi government.

In addition, when a majority of Iraqi parliamentarians signed a letter demanding a timetable for U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, McConnell told CNN's Wolf Blitzer on May 13: "I want to assure you, Wolf, if they vote to ask us to leave, we'll be glad to comply with their request."

The slow progress in Congress, together with events on the ground, have combined to set up what may be a climactic congressional vote in the fall. As the House left for Memorial Day recess, it put in motion procedures to force a vote on continuing the war immediately after a report to Congress by Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, and U.S. Amb. Ryan Crocker.

It is that vote to which the anti-war movement should now build. The bare Senate House majorities have to be expanded with substantial Republican support into two-thirds majorities to overcome a presidential veto or a majority to cut off funding.

Before that happens, it is just possible that Senate Republican leaders, panicky about a new election a year hence, will file down to the White House to demand an end to the war.

Many anti-war activists will be justifiably skeptical that Republicans will actually break from the White House in the fall. General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker may be able to conjure sufficient military progress—real or not—in the war to assuage "nervous nelly" Republicans, which could give Republicans at the end of their string new hope to cling to.

The fighting and dying in Iraq rage unabated. Bush is determined to continue the Iraq War until he can hand the messy quagmire off to his successor. He is under pressure, and change is happening, but much too slowly.

In the 1960s and 70s, it took many years for the anti-Vietnam War sentiment to build to the point that Congress ended U.S. involvement. The anti-Iraq War movement has to build the pressure in order to shorten that period of time from years to months.

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