

Democrats Versus the Peace Movement?

By Stephen Zunes | July 6, 2006

The U.S. Congress failed in recent weeks to take even symbolic steps to encourage a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, even though the majority of Americans support an end to the war. Many anti-war advocates are hoping that the mid-term U.S. elections in November will push Congress into Democratic hands and thereby increase the chances of ending the war. Don't hold your breath.

The Democratic leadership of both the House and Senate supports continued funding of the Iraq war and has been reluctant to force the Bush administration to set even a tentative deadline for the withdrawal of American troops. Indeed, the Democrats—who controlled the Senate in 2002—share responsibility with the Republicans for creating the tragic conflict in Iraq by voting to authorize the invasion in the first place. The majority of Democratic senators as well as the Democratic leadership of both houses gave President George W. Bush free rein to invade Iraq at the time and circumstances of his choosing in direct violation of the United Nations Charter, which the United States is legally obliged to uphold. These pro-war Democrats teamed up with the Bush administration to mislead the American public by making a series of false claims regarding the ongoing presence of “weapons of mass destruction” (WMDs) in Iraq and the “threat” supposedly posed by that government.

Just as a solid majority of Congress members blindly supported the Bush administration's lies about WMDs, they now blindly support the Bush administration's argument that the United States must continue prosecuting a counter-insurgency war that has taken the lives of more

than 2,500 Americans and tens of thousands of Iraqis, primarily civilians.

As a result, Congress will not likely stop the war—unless the anti-war movement forces it to do so.

In Search of Democratic Backbone

On June 15, the U.S. Senate overwhelmingly defeated a resolution calling for the withdrawal of American combat forces from Iraq by the end of this year. Only six of the 100 senators voted in favor of the resolution, even though public opinion polls indicate that the majority of Americans and the vast majority of Democrats nationwide support such a deadline. Furthermore, a recent Le Moyne College/Zogby International poll revealed that 72% of U.S. troops serving in Iraq believe that the United States should end its operations in that country by the end of 2006, thereby giving the Democrats a concrete way of demonstrating that they “support the troops.”

During the same week, the House of Representatives, by a 256-153 vote, claimed that the ongoing war in Iraq was part of the “war on terror” and explicitly declared that “it is not in the national security interest of the United States



to set an arbitrary date for the withdrawal or redeployment of United States Armed Forces from Iraq.” Forty-two Democrats joined all but three Republicans in supporting the resolution. Although the former Iraqi regime rid the country of WMDs years earlier, allowed UN inspectors to return to verify dismantlement, and maintained no ties to al-Qaida or other Islamic extremists, the House resolution claimed that the deposed government “constituted a threat against global peace and security and was in violation of mandatory United Nations Security Council Resolutions” and “supported terrorists.”

Faced with a lack of support in the Senate for a withdrawal of American forces by the end of the year, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts put forward a resolution the following week calling for a withdrawal by July 1, 2007. The Democratic leadership reportedly put enormous pressure on Kerry to withdraw even this tepid resolution from consideration, but the bill went to the floor anyway. Kerry’s bill was also soundly defeated, with no Republican senators and only 13 of the 44 Democratic senators voting in favor. The 87% of the Senate that believes U.S. forces in Iraq can stay indefinitely is also the percentage of Iraqis who want the United States to have a timetable for departure—but the sentiments of Iraqis have never been of particular concern for American politicians of either party.

A second resolution, sponsored by Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, simply called for the beginning of a withdrawal of some troops by the end of the year with no timetable for a complete withdrawal. This, too, was defeated, by a vote of 60-39. Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman declared that adopting the Levin resolution would result in “the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 being able to claim victory in Iraq and going on, emboldened, to attack us again here at

home.” Lieberman failed to mention that al-Qaida found recruitment opportunities inside Iraq only *after* the U.S. invasion. Lieberman was joined by Democrats Mark Dayton of Minnesota, Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, Ben Nelson of Nebraska, Bill Nelson of Florida, and Mark Pryor of Arkansas. All but one Republican senator opposed Levin’s resolution.

Both these Senate resolutions were non-binding. Even if the stronger Kerry resolution had passed, the Bush administration would have still been allowed to prosecute the war indefinitely. Resolutions like Kerry’s and Levin’s enable Democratic senators to have it both ways: to go on record opposing the war while continuing to fund it.

Dealing with the Dems

Because the Senate unanimously votes to fund the war in Iraq, Peace Action PAC, the political action committee of the country’s largest peace organization, will for the first time not endorse any senators for re-election this year. Some anti-war activists have gone further, not just withholding support but actively calling for the defeat of every pro-war senator regardless of party affiliation, even if it means supporting Green Party nominees or other anti-war challengers. Such strategists believe that Democrats will not likely change their pro-war positions as long as they can assume the support of their anti-war constituents.

Constituent pressure does indeed make a difference. Two of the half dozen most outspoken anti-war senators—Tom Harkin of Iowa and Kerry—voted in favor of the original resolution in October 2002 authorizing the invasion. Grassroots anti-war efforts in their home states

forced these formerly pro-war Democrats to reverse their stance.

However, apologists for the Democratic Party reply that efforts to defeat pro-war Democrats could result in electing enough Republicans to prevent the Democrats from re-taking the U.S. Senate. However, it should be recalled that the last time the Democrats controlled the Senate (2001-2002), they voted to authorize the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Not only might a Democrat-controlled Senate fail to end the war in Iraq, it may well authorize President Bush to launch yet another tragic war. Already, leading Democratic senators and presidential hopefuls like Hillary Clinton and Evan Bayh have attacked the Bush administration for being too eager to pursue diplomatic means in the Iran crisis. They have been more willing to entertain the exercise of military force to end the current impasse over that country's nuclear program. On other national security issues, these hard-line Democrats have defended the already-existing nuclear weapons arsenals of U.S. allies Pakistan, Israel, and India. And last month, an overwhelming majority of Democrats in the House voted in support of a resolution criticizing President Bush for not sufficiently punishing Palestinians who suffer under Israeli military occupation. In short, a Democratic majority in Congress will not necessarily mean a more enlightened foreign policy.

One might think that partisans of the Democratic Party would be in the forefront of the anti-war movement, given the imperative of completing a withdrawal prior to the end of President Bush's term. Otherwise, the final withdrawal of U.S. forces will likely take place under a Democratic administration, leading Republicans in subsequent years to blame any

anti-American terrorism or upsurge of violence and instability in the Middle East on the failure of Democrats to "finish the job in Iraq" started by the Bush administration.

Mobilizing for the Alternative

Having already authorized the invasion of Iraq back in October 2002, Congress can only stop the war at this point through its constitutionally mandated power of the purse. There is precedent for such congressional action. Following President Richard Nixon's decision to launch an invasion of Cambodia at the end of April 1970, Senators John Cooper of Kentucky and Frank Church of Idaho introduced a resolution that banned funding of ground troops in Cambodia. Over strong objections of the Nixon administration, the resolution passed and troops were withdrawn.

The Cooper-Church amendment succeeded in 1970 because of massive protests throughout the country against the invasion of Cambodia. Such protests included large-scale civil disobedience and other forms of nonviolent action, which, among other things, shut down over 200 college campuses nationwide. It will probably take a similar outpouring of protests before Congress reflects the will of the American public and forces the Bush administration to withdraw from Iraq.

Fortunately, plans are in the works for just such a national mobilization. A broad coalition of peace groups calling itself the Declaration of Peace has planned, should Congress not implement a withdrawal plan, a massive nonviolent action campaign for September 21-28. The anti-war movement hopes that shutting down congressional offices and governmental and commercial centers throughout the country will

undermine the current bipartisan support for Bush's war. Endorsers include Clergy and Laity Concerned, Code Pink, United for Justice and Peace, the Network of Spiritual Progressives, Pax Christi USA, Peace Action, War Resisters League, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Americans who oppose the war are already the majority. Whether we can actually stop the war will depend not so much on the composition of Congress but on how many Americans will be willing this September to put their bodies on the line in the cause of peace.

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