

New Democratic Leader in Senate Unlikely to Oppose Bush Administration's Foreign Policy Agenda

By Stephen Zunes (November 19, 2004)

The overwhelming selection of Nevada Senator Harry Reid as minority leader of Congress' upper house shows that the Democrats are still willing to give their backing for the Bush administration's reckless militarism and contravention of international legal norms.

Despite evidence that Iraq no longer had weapons of mass destruction, WMD programs, or offensive delivery systems, Reid voted in October 2002 to authorize a U.S. invasion of Iraq because of what he claimed was "the threat posed by Saddam Hussein." The Reid-backed resolution falsely accused Iraq of "continuing to possess and develop a significant chemical and biological weapons capability ... [and] actively seeking a nuclear weapons capability, thereby continuing to threaten the national security interests of the United States."

When Democratic Senator Joseph Biden, the ranking Democrat on the International Relations committee, tried to alter the wording of the resolution so as not to give President Bush the blank check he was seeking and to put some limitations on his war-making authority, Reid—as assistant minority leader of the Senate—helped circumvent Biden's efforts by signing on to the White House's version. As the Democratic "whip," Reid then persuaded a majority of Democratic Senators to vote down a resolution offered by Democratic Senator Carl Levin that would authorize force only if the UN Security Council voted to give the U.S. that authority and to instead support the White House resolution giving Bush the right to invade even without such legal authorization. (By contrast, a sizable majority of Democrats in the House of Representatives voted *against* the Republican resolution.)

In March 2003, after Iraq allowed United Nations inspectors to return and it was becoming apparent that there were no WMDs to be found, President Bush decided to invade Iraq anyway. Reid rushed to the president's support, claiming that—despite its clear violation of the United Nations Charter—the invasion was "lawful" and that he "commends and supports the efforts and leadership of the President."

Following the invasion, President Bush asked Congress for \$87 billion to pay for the first phases of the occupation. Despite record budget deficits, major cutbacks in

valuable social programs, and polls showing that 59% of the public opposed the funding request, Reid supported the resolution, stating, "I voted for President Bush's \$87 billion request because we have to support our troops ... period." To this day, Reid continues to defend the U.S. occupation of Iraq and taxpayer funding for it. Reid apparently believes that the best way to "support our troops" is not to demand that the Bush administration allow them to return home to safety but force them to fight in an unnecessary, unwinnable, counter-insurgency war on the other side of the planet.

Losing Checks and Balances

Historically, opposition leaders in the Senate have taken seriously Congress' role under the U.S. Constitution to place a check on presidential powers. However, Reid has repeatedly demonstrated his naïve faith in President George W. Bush's judgment, not only twice granting him unprecedented war-making authority, but justifying this betrayal of his constitutional responsibility by claiming that "no President of the United States of whatever political philosophy will take this nation to war as a first resort alternative rather than as a last resort."

The last Senator from the inland West to lead the Democrats was Mike Mansfield of Montana, who served as Senate majority leader for most of the 1960s and 1970s. He courageously spoke out against the Vietnam War, not only when the Republican Richard Nixon was president, but also when Democrat Lyndon Johnson was president. Unlike Mansfield, however, who was willing to challenge the foreign policy of his own party's administration, Reid refuses to speak out even when the administration is from the opposing political party.

Perhaps most disappointing aspect of the Senate Democrats' selection of Reid as their leader is that it underscores the Democrats' lack of support for international law and their



blind support for the Bush administration's position that the United States and its allies are somehow exempt from their international legal obligations.

For example, Reid justified his support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq by echoing the administration's claims that "this nation would be justified in making war to enforce the terms we imposed on Iraq in 1991" since Iraq promised "the world it would not engage in further aggression and it would destroy its weapons of mass destruction. It has refused to take those steps. That refusal constitutes a breach of the armistice which renders it void and justifies resumption of the armed conflict."

First of all, Iraq had not engaged in further acts of aggression and it had already destroyed its weapons of mass destruction, demonstrating Reid's willingness to defend the Bush administration's lies in order to justify a U.S. takeover of that oil-rich country.

Secondly, even if Iraq had been guilty as charged, the armistice agreement to which Reid referred—UN Security Council resolution 687—had no military enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, resolution 678, which originally authorized the use of force against Iraq, had become null and void once Iraqi troops withdrew from Kuwait. An additional resolution specifically authorizing the use of force would have been required in order for the United States to legally engage in any further military action against the Baghdad regime.

Iraq is not the only area where Reid's contempt for international legal standards is apparent: Reid is a cosponsor of a pending resolution condemning the International Court of Justice for its July decision, which held that governments

engaged in belligerent occupation are required to uphold relevant provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention and related standards of international humanitarian law. Furthermore, despite a series of UN Security Council resolutions declaring Israel's occupation, colonization, and annexation of Arab East Jerusalem illegal, Reid sponsored the Jerusalem Embassy Act that insists that "Jerusalem remain an undivided city" under Israeli control. In addition, Reid has supported Israel's colonization of the occupied West Bank in contravention of a series of UN Security Council resolutions calling on Israel to withdraw these illegal settlements. Despite the protests of human rights groups, Reid has strongly defended Israeli attacks on civilian targets in the occupied territories and the construction of a separation wall deep into the occupied West Bank, also in contravention of international legal norms.

As a number of liberal activists have pointed out, Reid's positions on trade, abortion, civil liberties, gay rights, spending priorities, and health care are also closer to the Bush administration than most Democratic voters. However, given what is at stake, it is foreign policy where the need for forceful congressional opposition to the Bush agenda is most important. In electing Harry Reid as their Senate leader, the Democrats have once again demonstrated that they are simply not up to the task.

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