

Congress Begins to "Change the Course" in Iraq

By Erik Leaver | November 18, 2005

Falling in line with the peace movement and public opinion, the Senate has finally taken a small but a symbolically important step to challenge President George W. Bush's policy in Iraq. Lawmakers approved legislation that endorses a "phased redeployment of United States forces" from Iraq."

Democrats and Republicans acknowledged that staying the course is not the way to go," Senator Harry Reid (D-NV), the Minority leader, said summing up the Senate vote. "Therefore, this is a vote of no confidence on the Bush administration policy in Iraq."

For the first time since giving Bush authorization to go to war three years ago, the Senate engaged in a debate over Iraq policy. And while the demands of the peace movement to bring the troops home now were not met, Democrats were united setting forth an exit strategy that the Republicans were forced to accept. Unfortunately, Republicans rebuffed the Democrats' demand for a timeline for withdrawal and for language stating unequivocally that the United States wouldn't maintain a permanent presence in Iraq. While the legislation is largely symbolic being a "sense of the Senate" resolution, it represents a significant shift for U.S. policymakers at a time when 160,000 troops are based in Iraq and after more than 2,000 soldiers have been killed and 15,000 wounded in this war.

Highlights of the "United States Policy on Iraq Act" amendment that passed overwhelmingly by a vote of 79 to 19 include:

- The endorsement of phased redeployment of U.S. troops. (Members of congress are using the phrase "redeployment" as a politically safe word for "withdrawal".)
- Demands that the Bush administration explain to Congress and the American people its strategy

for the successful completion of the mission in Iraq.

- A requirement that the Administration update Congress regarding the course of the war and progress Iraqi forces are making every 90 days.

While significant, these requirements fall far short of laying the foundation for a successful exit strategy. Earlier this month, in the House of Representatives, Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) announced a much clearer plan. McGovern's resolution prohibits the use of tax payer funds to deploy United States Armed Forces to Iraq. It gives real commitment to internationalizing the peace by supporting transitional security provided by other countries—including international organizations like NATO and the United Nations. And the legislation has a real commitment to the Iraqi people providing continued support for their security forces and international forces in Iraq—as well as funding for reconstruction efforts.

As in the Senate, where various factions of the Democratic Party came together, McGovern's sentiments for bringing the troops home were surprisingly matched by one of the leading Democratic hawks. John Murtha (D-PA), who initially supported the Iraq invasion, called for the immediate withdrawal of all American forces from Iraq in a speech on November 17. In one of the strongest statements against the war to date Murtha declared, "Our mili-



tary has done everything that has been asked of them, the U.S. can not accomplish anything further in Iraq militarily. It is time to bring them home.”

Just as Democrats are beginning to be on the same page on Iraq policy, Bush is starting to lose his grip over Republicans. The first flares were sent up earlier this year as five GOP lawmakers co-sponsored legislation in the House calling for troops to begin withdrawal no later than October 2006. The Senate vote serves as confirmation that more Republicans are distancing themselves from the President's plan to “stay the course.”

What's important here is that members of Congress are finally beginning to catch up with the 60% of the

public who believe the war is being handled badly and want to see troops start to come home. While not listening with both ears, Congress is at least beginning to feel the drumbeats of public opinion.

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