

After 94-1 “support the troops” vote in Senate

Congressional Democrats, Republicans begin talks with White House on war spending bill

By Tom Carter
19 May 2007

The congressional Democrats’ “anti-war” charade over the Bush administration’s war-funding request is coming to its inevitable, ignoble end.

Democratic and Republican senators on Thursday voted 94-1 to pass a “placeholder” motion expressing “support for the troops” in lieu of their own version of a war-funding bill. They then moved to nominate conferees for closed-door negotiations with representatives of the House of Representatives and the White House, where the real war-funding bill will be drawn up.

The Senate resolution, sponsored by Democrat Patty Murray of Washington, states that it is “the sense of the Senate that no action should be taken to undermine the safety of the Armed Forces of the United States or impact their ability to complete their assigned or future missions.” In the euphemistic language of official Washington, this means that the Senate will continue to fully fund the war in Iraq.

The resolution was doubtless agreed upon in advance by leading senators from both parties in consultation with the Bush White House. It was passed, without any advance public notice, toward the end of the Senate’s business for the week. No press conferences were held, no announcements made, no statements issued explaining the senators’ decision, and the maneuver went unreported on Thursday’s nightly news broadcasts and barely noted in Friday morning’s newspapers.

The stealth vote to bypass debate and passage of a new Senate war-funding measure and proceed directly to conference with the House, which last week passed a Democratic bill authorizing war-funding in two installments, was a concession to the White House. It

was a signal to begin serious talks aimed at producing a bill that President Bush will sign prior to Congress’ Memorial Day recess, which begins next Friday.

This cowardly maneuver came one day after a narrow majority of Senate Democrats, including contenders for the party’s 2008 presidential nomination Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Joseph Biden, voted for legislation sponsored by Senator Russ Feingold setting a date for the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq. As with all Democratic “troops out” proposals, Feingold’s bill authorized the continued presence of tens of thousands of supposedly “non-combat” troops indefinitely to continue counterinsurgency operations.

The Feingold bill vote was, in any case, staged with the prior approval of Senate Republicans to provide political cover for Democrats in advance of Thursday’s motion guaranteeing full funding for the war. It was an entirely cynical exercise, since all involved knew the measure would never pass.

“The American people deserve to know that the Democrats’ commitment to bring this war to its responsible end has never been stronger,” declared Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid on Wednesday. On Thursday, shortly before he and all but one of his fellow Democrats (Feingold) voted for Senator Murray’s “support the troops” resolution, Reid reaffirmed his party’s supposed determination to end the war, saying the previous day’s vote on the Feingold bill had shown “real and growing momentum on both sides of the aisle away from this tragic and endless war.”

After Thursday’s vote, some leading Democrats were sounding a different note. “To be successful, we must end the finger-pointing and instead roll up our sleeves

and work together,” said Democratic Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia. “I believe that we can—and we will,” he added.

Bush expressed his satisfaction with the Senate vote, saying, “I talked specifically about benchmarks, and we will work with members of Congress to come up with a supplemental that both sides can live with.” His reference to benchmarks points to the likely form the ultimate war-funding measure will take. It will grant Bush all the money he wants to continue and escalate the killing in Iraq, but add window dressing about the need for the Iraqi government to meet certain benchmarks laid down by Washington. Central to these is the passage of an oil law that will open up Iraq’s oil fields to exploitation by US-based oil conglomerates.

Bush’s Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten was immediately dispatched to begin talks with conferees from both houses of Congress.

Reid characterized a 45-minute private meeting Thursday with Bolten and Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell as “constructive” and “comfortable.” Reid reportedly offered that the Bush administration could waive any deadlines for withdrawal or redeployment included in a future bill, but Bolten rejected this offer.

Bolten reportedly agreed to another meeting early next week. According to a report by Associated Press, all parties involved pledged “not to divulge details to outsiders in the spirit of cooperation.”

Democrats have publicly acknowledged that they are eager to get the more than \$100-billion-dollar war-spending bill to Bush before the Memorial Day recess. They are doubtless anxious to participate in the flag-waving that accompanies the holiday without fear of being attacked for refusing to “support the troops.”

The lone dissenting vote in the Senate Thursday was cast by Feingold. Vermont’s nominally independent and self-styled “socialist” senator, Bernard Sanders, voted “aye.”

“Ramming a symbolic bill through the Senate so that the actual bill can be written by a handful of people behind closed doors is unacceptable,” Feingold said. However, he made clear his own support for continued funding of the war. Referring to the war-funding bill that was vetoed by Bush on May 1, he said, “The first supplemental passed by Congress was a step forward, but I hope that whatever emerges from the upcoming

conference will not be a step back.”

The same day the Democrats carried out their war-funding maneuver in the Senate, Democrats in the House voted overwhelmingly for a defense authorization bill for fiscal year 2008. The \$646 billion bill, the largest military spending bill since World War II, passed by a vote of 397 to 27. It includes \$142 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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