

One day after WikiLeaks exposures of US war crimes

# Congress ratifies Obama escalation of Afghanistan war

By Patrick Martin  
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Little more than 24 hours after the release of 91,000 documents detailing US military atrocities in Afghanistan, the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives gave final approval to a funding bill to pay for the escalation of the war.

By a margin of 308-114, well over the two-thirds majority required under an expedited procedure known as “suspension of the rules,” the House backed a \$60 billion supplemental funding bill passed by the Senate last week.

More than half the Democratic caucus joined forces with a near-unanimous Republican minority to pass the bill. The comfortable two-thirds majority was significant since 162 Democrats voted earlier this month for a resolution to require the Obama administration to begin significant troop withdrawals by July 2011. If that many Democrats had opposed the funding bill, it would have failed to win a two-thirds vote, but as always in such parliamentary maneuvering, just enough Democrats switched their votes to provide the margin required to sustain the war policies of American imperialism.

The bill includes more than \$33.5 billion for the additional 30,000 troops in Afghanistan and to pay for other Pentagon operational expenses, \$5.1 billion to replenish the Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster relief fund, \$6.2 billion for State Department aid programs in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Haiti and \$13.4 billion in benefits for Vietnam War veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

Domestic spending initiatives added to the supplemental bill to win passage through the House earlier this month were removed in the Senate after they failed to win even majority support, let alone 60 votes. Among these were \$10 billion for state governments to avert mass teacher layoffs.

In a public statement in the White House rose garden, after a morning meeting with congressional leaders of both parties, President Barack Obama appealed for the House to pass the emergency funding bill.

Obama addressed the release of documents by WikiLeaks for the first time, while deliberately evading the evidence of war crimes by US forces in Afghanistan. Instead, he joined in the pretense that there was “nothing new” in the leaked documents, the line peddled by the White House to the American media and adopted by newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, as well as the television networks.

“While I’m concerned about the disclosure of sensitive information from the battlefield that could potentially jeopardize individuals or operations,” Obama said, “the fact is these documents don’t reveal any issues that haven’t already informed our public debate on Afghanistan; indeed, they point to the same challenges that led me to conduct an extensive review of our policy last fall.”

Given that the WikiLeaks documents include reports on hundreds of incidents in which US forces killed innocent Afghan civilians, many of which were covered up or censored in the US media, Obama’s claim is a flat-out lie. These atrocities have not “already informed our public debate on Afghanistan,” since the public was not allowed to know about them.

There is no doubt that Obama himself, his top aides in the White House and Pentagon and the leading circles in the media were well aware of these atrocities. That makes all the more criminal the president’s decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan, pouring in 47,000 troops over the past year and a half and authorizing a major increase in the level of violence—knowing that thousands more innocent lives will be destroyed.

Obama reiterated his determination to stay the course in Afghanistan, declaring, “We’ve substantially increased our commitment there, insisted upon greater accountability from our partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan, developed a new strategy that can work and put in place a team, including one of our finest generals, to execute that plan. Now we have to see that strategy through.”

He described Afghanistan as “the region from which the 9/11 attacks were waged and other attacks against the United States and our friends and allies have been planned.” This repeats the hoary mythology of the Bush administration, which sought to use 9/11 as an all-purpose pretext for US military aggression around the world.

US officials have conceded that the total number of Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan is less than 100, an estimate that makes nonsense of the claim that the war is being waged to avenge the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

There are more than 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan because Obama, like Bush, is pursuing an agenda of using American military power to seize control of key strategic regions, particularly in the oil-rich Persian Gulf and Central Asia, to

uphold the world position of American imperialism against its major rivals.

Public opinion in the United States and in most of the countries participating in the NATO intervention has turned decisively against the war in Afghanistan. But this shift in mass sentiment finds no reflection within the two parties of big business that control Capitol Hill.

The so-called antiwar faction of the House Democrats issued an open letter Monday decrying the removal of social spending from the bill and citing the WikiLeaks material as a reason to oppose the funding bill—but only because the leaked documents show the difficulties facing the U.S. occupation, not because they provide evidence of war crimes.

The open letter of the “antiwar” Democrats—signed by, among others, former presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich, eight members of the Congressional Black Caucus, and Raul Grijalva, chairman of the House Progressive Caucus—criticizes the war as a failure in a good cause, not an atrocity in a bad one.

The letter does not call for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Instead it credits the US military and the Obama administration with “trying to build a modern, democratic state in an area divided by tribal and ethnic identities,” only expressing regret that this mission is unlikely to succeed. This is not genuine opposition to imperialist war, but rather an effort to save American imperialism from a humiliating defeat.

Kucinich & Co. want a gradual pullback of US forces before the entire operation culminates in a Vietnam-style debacle, with American helicopters plucking the frightened remnants of a US puppet regime from rooftops in Kabul. In the meantime, their participation in the congressional charade gives a “left” cover for the Democratic Party and the Obama administration.

Two Senate committee hearings Tuesday demonstrated the all-out support for the Afghanistan war in both the Democratic and Republican parties. The Senate Armed Services Committee rubber-stamped the nomination of Marine General James Mattis to succeed General David Petraeus as the head of the US Central Command, which oversees military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing on the question of whether and under what circumstances it would be possible for the US to negotiate with the insurgents in Afghanistan. Committee chairman John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004 and an erstwhile antiwar activist during the Vietnam War, dismissed the significance of the WikiLeaks exposure of US atrocities in Afghanistan.

It was “important not to over-hype or get excessively excited about the meaning of those documents,” he said. “To those of us who lived through the Pentagon Papers, there’s no relation to that event or these documents. People need to be very careful in evaluating what they read there.”

The lead witness at the hearing, former US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, warned that US public opinion was turning against the war. “Impatience is on the rise again in this country,” he told the committee, warning that a collapse of domestic political support for the war was “what our adversaries are counting on now.” In that context, he expressed reservations about the July

2011 date set by Obama for beginning a limited drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan.

Australian counterinsurgency specialist David Kilcullen, a key adviser of US General David Petraeus during the Iraq “surge,” called for the Obama administration to “stop talking about 2011, start talking about 2014.” He added that the main necessity is “a big tactical hit on the Taliban,” inflicting “very significant damage.” The bloodshed would be “unpleasant, but unavoidable.”

This view was echoed by Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, the senior Republican on the committee. “For the negotiating to be successful, we have to demonstrate strength,” he said. “As bloody as this sounds, it’s critical that we kill a lot of Taliban.” He called for inflicting “a rather significant casualty toll, observed by all parties including the Taliban and those we’re negotiating with.”

The leading Democrat in the House of Representatives, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, came to Obama’s defense over the WikiLeaks documents, saying, “they do not address current circumstances. A lot of it predates the president’s new policy.”

Actually, of course, Obama’s “new policy” calls for much more killing, not less. The after-action reports of the slaughter of civilians through bombing, missiles, artillery and small arms have no doubt doubled and tripled as the US military has gone on the offensive in the Taliban strongholds in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Another House Democratic supporter of the war, Adam Smith of Washington state, openly defended the operations of Task Force 373, the military death squad whose brutal activities caused much of the devastation detailed in the WikiLeaks documents.

“This is a war. The enemy is shooting at us, and we’re shooting at them,” Smith told the Associated Press. U.S. troops are “aggressively targeting” the insurgents, he said, but “condemnation of our troops is completely wrong and brutally unfair.”

The bloody-minded consensus in official Washington was summed up in an editorial Tuesday in the *Washington Post*, which denounced claims that the WikiLeaks documents constituted “evidence for war crimes prosecution.” The newspaper dismissed the tally of 144 cases where US and NATO forces killed civilians, concluding “the 195 deaths it counts in those episodes, though regrettable, do not constitute a shocking total for a four-year period.”

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