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War Funding Bill Stalls in House

131 Republicans Vote 'Present' in Protest of Pelosi Tactics

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Friday, May 16, 2008; A03

An odd coalition of angry Republicans and antiwar Democrats yesterday torpedoed a \$162.5 billion proposal to continue funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving [the House](#) to pass a measure that demands troop withdrawals, bans torture and expands education benefits for returning veterans.

The surprise action left antiwar activists on and off [Capitol Hill](#) exultant, Republicans gloating and Democratic leaders baffled. Recriminations from all sides quickly followed.

House leaders had broken the war funding bill into three separate measures. The first, to continue funding combat operations, needed Republican votes to pass over the objection of antiwar Democrats. The second would impose strict Iraq-related policy measures strongly opposed by [President Bush](#), and the third would fund domestic priorities, including a new G.I. Bill and levees around New Orleans.

That legislative legerdemain became the plan's undoing. Rather than go along, 131 House Republicans voted "present" on the war funding provision, saying they were incensed that [House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-Calif.) and a few of her lieutenants had drafted the bill in secret, then expected them to play along.

"It was a political scheme. We wanted to expose it, and we did," declared House [Minority Leader John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio).

Democrats saw it differently. "Republicans had the choice -- fund the troops or don't fund the troops. They voted present," said House [Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer](#) (Md.).

"You can't say something is the critical battle of our time and vote present," said House [Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel](#) (Ill.). "Explain that to the troops."

The strange conclusion to the day-long war debate may not help a Congress mired in record-low approval ratings and a House GOP that is reeling from internal dissension and three straight losses in special elections in reliably Republican districts.

But the impact is likely to be short-lived. The Senate will take up its version of the war funding bill next week; it is expected to restore the war funds and strip out the policy prescriptions most disagreeable to the [White House](#).

The White House reiterated its veto threat of the overall package yesterday morning, demanding a new version stripped of policy prescriptions and domestic spending, including the bill's \$52 billion expansion of veterans' education benefits. The supplemental appropriations vote is the last major clash on Iraq policy between Congress and Bush.

Had it become law, the House bill would have brought the total cost of the war in Iraq to around \$660 billion, according to the [Congressional Research Service](#), more expensive than any [U.S. military](#) effort except World War II.

As passed, the House bill would require troop withdrawals from Iraq to begin within 30 days, with a goal of removing all combat forces by December 2009. The Iraqi government would have to match U.S. reconstruction funding dollar for dollar, and would be required to offer the U.S. military the same fuel subsidies it provides its own citizens.

Troops would get more rest between combat deployments, and every branch of government -- including the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) -- would have to abide by the Army Field Manual's guidelines on interrogation, which bans action that amount to torture. Those policy prescriptions passed the House by 227 to 196, with a surprising eight Republican votes, including [Reps. Michael N. Castle](#) (Del.), [Christopher Shays](#) (Conn.) and [James T. Walsh](#) (N.Y.).

On the domestic side, unemployment compensation would be extended for 13 weeks. Regulations the Bush administration hoped to impose to restrict access to the [Medicaid](#) program would be blocked. Funds would be provided for international food aid, levees around New Orleans, federal prisons and the 2010 Census. And the G.I. Bill passed after World War II for an earlier generation of veterans would be updated.

That domestic portion passed 256 to 166, with 32 Republicans voting yes.

The politically controversial expanded G.I. Bill was expected to give momentum to the House measure. The provision, written by [Sens. James Webb](#) (D-Va.) and [John W. Warner](#) (R-Va.), would cover the costs of school at even the most expensive state universities for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, and would encourage private universities to provide additional student aid for them. The House bill would pay for the benefit with a surtax of half a percentage point on income over \$500,000 for individuals and \$1 million for couples.

The measure has attracted broad bipartisan support, but it is opposed by Bush because of its cost, its tax increase and fears that its generosity could entice service members to leave the military rather than reenlist at the end of their tours. [Sen. John McCain](#) (Ariz.), the presumptive Republican nominee, has put forward a less generous alternative that would save its richest benefits for service members doing multiple tours.

But McCain's efforts have run into bipartisan opposition -- from lawmakers, veterans organizations and educators. Former homeland security secretary [Tom Ridge](#), a close McCain ally, came out for Webb's measure yesterday.

"I have tremendous regard for Senator McCain, but I can't figure out where he is right now," said Dartmouth College President James Wright, a former Marine who helped negotiate the Webb-Warner language. "It seems to me our posture as a nation cannot be to say to servicemen and -women, 'We do not value you unless you reenlist.' That wasn't the contract

they signed."

The House actions were a dream come true for the antiwar movement.

"It is time now for Americans to be heard and for this Congress to move forward with the safe redeployment of our troops," exulted Rep. [Sheila Jackson Lee](#) (D-Tex.) who called on the House to use the \$162.5 billion in war funds for domestic priorities.

"For the first time ever, the U.S. House has now taken decisive action to bring this war to a close," declared Alan Charney, program director of the antiwar group USAction.

When the Senate takes up the bill, its version will include war funding, but prescriptions on troop withdrawals and torture will probably fall to a [GOP](#) filibuster. Republicans have argued that any tax increase is unacceptable, especially in a time of economic slowdown. Even Democratic leaders in the Senate have said they will oppose the House's tax increase to pay for veterans benefits.

More unclear is the future of the education benefits, as well as domestic spending that Bush has vowed to veto but will garner considerable support in both parties. The Senate also is expected to go along with House efforts to force the Iraqi government to shoulder more of its reconstruction and self-defense costs.

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