

DEMOCRAT MAJORITY IN CONGRESS: WILL IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

In January 2007, the Democrats took control of the House and Senate after 12 years of nearly unbroken Republican rule since 1994, with resolute calls for a bipartisan comity and a pledge to move quickly on a domestic agenda of health-care, homeland security, education and energy proposals. While Senator Harry M. Reid, a Democrat from Nevada, took the helm of the Senate, what was really important was that the high privilege of handling the gavel of the House of Representatives was handed over to a woman - Nancy Pelosi - for the first time in American history. In that respect, it was a cause for celebration for both Democrats and Republicans. As Pelosi assumed control of the House, she proclaimed, "This is an historic moment, for Congress, and for the women of this country. It is a moment for which we have waited more than 200 years." A non sequitur (does politics have a gender?) as far as US domestic politics are concerned.

The Democrats also hope to, for the first time, put a woman in charge at the White House with Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton as one of the leading Democrat candidates for the presidential primaries in 2008. But whether a woman would fare any better than a man at the helm of the White House and its political intrigues, is a question best left to the feminists? The real question here is whether the Democrat political agenda, in terms of foreign policy, would be any different from that of the current Republican administration?

The Democrats maintain a tenuous hold on the Congress. Democrats have 233 of the 435 seats in the new House, and a much narrower hold on the Senate: 51 of the 100 seats - there are 49 Democrats and 49 Republicans and two independents, who both vote with Democrats. The fragile Senate margin ensures that hardly any Democratic-sponsored legislation can pass without support from at least some Republicans. In real terms, therefore, Democratic control of both Congressional chambers would mean little change in the reality of foreign policy. The party is unlikely to have sufficient control to drive through controversial ideas. Members would be further constrained by a Republican Executive, including the president that already holds much of the necessary authority to conduct foreign policy.

Traditionally, the label 'conservative' has been used to identify the Republican Party which has been more solicitous of business interests and gets greater support from the business sector. The 'liberal' Democrats generally urge the cause of greater government participation and regulatory authority, especially at the federal level. More recently, however, 'conservative' headings have been adopted by members of both parties who emphasise decentralised government power, strengthened private enterprise, and a strong US military posture overseas,

while the designation 'liberal' has been applied to those favouring an increased federal government role in economic and social affairs, disengagement from foreign military commitments, and the intensive pursuit of nuclear-arms reduction. (<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Americas/United-States-POLITICAL-PARTIES.html>) Between them, the two ruling parties closely safeguard their shared control of the political system. Despite their differences, both the Democrat and the Republican parties have come to share a fundamental stake in promoting the interests of big business and the economic, political and military dominance of the US over the rest of the world.

As the 110th Congress convened in January 2007, both Democrats and Republicans alike pledged cooperation, despite years of bitter partisanship and gridlock, to try to get it off on a productive note. In the House, Democrats did not skip a beat between formally taking control and getting to work on what they called their "hundred-hour agenda." As the first order of the new change, the House nearly unanimously approved a broad package of internal rule changes designed to sever the cosy links that have developed between lawmakers and lobbyists. The changes would prohibit House members or employees from knowingly accepting gifts or travel from a registered lobbyist, foreign agent or lobbyist's client. Lawmakers could no longer fly on corporate jets. In addition, Congressional travel, financed by outside groups, would have to be approved in advance by the House Ethics Committee and immediately disclosed to the public. This was a remarkable change considering that House Republicans could barely pass a far weaker measure in May 2006 and ultimately did not enact any measure because they could not reach agreement with the Senate. Voters in November 2006 had identified corruption as one of their primary concerns, and the House responded with immediate affect.

On the domestic front, the Democrats hope to pass new rules to promote open deliberations in the House, rein in special-interest spending and pet projects of lawmakers, and prohibit passage of spending or tax measures that increase the federal deficit. Till the presidential elections in 2008, the Democrats in the House also plan to double the number of US Special Forces hunting for Osama bin Laden and terrorist networks; enact new homeland security measures; put a hold on Congressional pay raises until the national minimum wage is raised, and end tax giveaways that reward companies for moving American jobs overseas; allow federally funded stem cell research; permit the federal government to negotiate lower prescription-drug prices for Medicare beneficiaries; make college tuition permanently tax-deductible; cut student loan interest rates and expand Pell Grants; lower foreign oil dependence and create a cleaner environment by sponsoring initiatives for energy-efficient technologies and domestic alternatives like biofuels, as well as enact tough laws to stop price-gouging at the gas pump. In August 2007, the Congress also approved the most crucial bill of

the 110th Congress – H.R. 1 Implementing the Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act - for securing America against terrorism.

The most pressing goal of the Democrat agenda, which Pelosi hopes to enact, is a push to begin a phased redeployment of US forces from Iraq by the end of 2007. Pelosi herself has acknowledged that her carefully constructed consensus agenda will not satisfy the angry electorate that swept the Democrats to power. Democrats will have to confront President Bush on the larger, more controversial issues of the day: the war in Iraq, military tribunals that suspend the legal rights of terrorism suspects, and warrant-less wiretapping by the National Security Agency. To make it clear that such issues will have to be addressed, Democrat Reps reintroduced legislation, on the first day of the new Congress, to mandate that NSA surveillance once again involve a warrant from a secret federal court. Pelosi's call on 4 January 2007 for a new direction in Iraq "that allows us to responsibly redeploy American forces" elicited strong applause from her party. Iraq and the 'war on terror', therefore, will be the issues and possible impediments to Democratic future plans.

However, Democrat presidential hopefuls like Hillary R. Clinton see no need to have an alternative agenda as far as Pentagon plans for the 'war on terror' are concerned. In a televised debate on 3 June 2007 Mrs. Clinton, who has tried to minimise her differences with her rivals on the issue, bluntly disagreed with a main rival, former Senator John Edwards, who had said that the Administration's so-called war on terror was little more than a slogan. "I believe we are safer than we were," Mrs. Clinton said. "We are not yet safe enough, and I have proposed over the last year a number of policies that I think we should be following."

What is at play here is party politics. The Democrats are seeking to use the votes against the 'war on terror' to identify Republicans with a deeply unpopular president and a deeply unpopular war in Iraq - the Democrats present themselves as opposed to both.

The convening of the Democratic-led Congress has also opened a new chapter in the presidency of Bush, who faces divided government as he cements his legacy in his final year in the White House. President Bush and Democratic leaders are already talking of a new era of cooperation, but have warned that neither would roll over for the other. As control of the House moved to the Democrats, President Bush, although in a 'lame duck' period, can only hope that both parties can work together over the next one year in areas of common grounds including immigration and minimum wage measures. The Democrat-led Congress will certainly not be a rubber stamp for the White House. This became pretty clear when President Bush acceded to calls by the Speaker of the House, Pelosi, to appoint the ex-CIA chief, Bill M. Gates as the new consensus Defence Secretary to replace Donald Rumsfeld. Mr. Gates has worked on the Iraq

Study Group, a bipartisan panel that has made recommendations to President Bush on how to proceed in Iraq.

The message here is clear: The American people are calling for a “new direction” and want their leaders in Washington to set aside partisan differences, conduct themselves in an ethical manner and work together to address the challenges facing the nation. Nevertheless, President Bush has made it amply clear that his leadership style will not change since winning the ‘war on terror’ seems by far the most important priority of his receding Administration. As the House narrowly approved a \$124 billion bill in April 2007, requiring American troops to begin withdrawing from Iraq by 1 October 2007 and a complete withdrawal by August 2008, President Bush has also vetoed the war spending bill moved by the Congressional Democrats calling the measure a “prescription for chaos and confusion.” President Bush rejected strategies advocated by newly empowered Democrats, restive Republicans and the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, describing them as a formula for deepening disaster. “To step back now would force a collapse of the Iraqi government.” Not since Richard Nixon ordered American troops in Vietnam to invade Cambodia in 1970 has a president taken such a risk with an increasingly unpopular war. The American-led war has lasted nearly four years, claiming over 3,000 American lives. In so doing, Mr. Bush is taking a calculated gamble that no matter how much hue and cry his new strategy may provoke, in the end the American people will give him more time to turn around the war in Iraq and Congress will not have the political nerve to thwart him by cutting off money for the war. It seems that President Bush is convinced that he is right and that history will vindicate him, even if that vindication comes long after he is gone from the Oval Office.

So strong has been the Bush Administration’s stand on its ‘war on terror’ that the Congress voted in May 2007 to meet President Bush’s demand for \$95 billion to pay for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan through September 2007, providing a momentary truce in a bitter struggle over war policy. Even before the House and the Senate acted, Mr. Bush welcomed the legislation, which does not set the timetable sought by Democrats for withdrawing troops, but requires the Iraqi government to meet a series of benchmarks as a condition of receiving further American reconstruction aid. The measure also calls for reports from Mr. Bush about how his strategy is unfolding in Iraq and requires independent assessments of the performance of the Iraqi government. Democrats now require the Bush Administration to put forward a strategy for Iraq that has reasonable benchmarks, estimated costs and timeframes, as well as an action plan for completing the mission.

The Congress vote failed to end the Iraq war. However, it was significant for other reasons. The vote on withdrawal was almost entirely along party lines and reflected the Democratic majority in both the houses. The House of Representatives voted 280 to 142 to pass the bill. The Senate vote was 80-14 (See <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/05/24/iraq.funding/index.html>).

These votes are a far cry from the overwhelming support that President Bush received from Congress in going to war against Iraq.

The Republicans, in other words, have continued to support President Bush and the Iraq war as a cohesive party, but the Democratic Party has seen a major shift in position. This change is in part a testament to the determined efforts of the American peace movement to oppose the war and to educate public opinion. The fact that the war has been going very badly for the United States has certainly been important in making public opinion more receptive to the critical voices. The congressional vote also reflected public opinion about the war. Democratic Party leaders in both the House and the Senate have explained their effort to pass legislation to withdraw US troops from Iraq as keeping faith with the voters in the November 2006 Congressional elections, which brought the Democrats to power.

These efforts do not mean that the Democrats, who control Congress, are doing everything they can to end the Iraq war. The Democratic Party leadership has made it clear that they will not use the one power they have that would certainly end the war. They will not stop funding the war. The legislation requiring withdrawal from Iraq was part of a bill that approved \$124 billion in military spending; \$95 billion of this is for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is in fact more money than the military and the White House had asked for. October 2007 set a new stage for renewed confrontation with Democrats over the Administration's handling of the Iraq war as President Bush asked Congress to approve \$196 billion to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and other national security programmes.

For all practical purposes, the Democratic Party's goal is to strengthen its position for the 2008 Congressional elections. But Iraq will not be the only major issue that the Democrat-controlled Congress will have to contend with. With the Bush Administration focused on the 'war on terror' and its emphasis on checking proliferation of 'weapons of mass destruction' among 'rogue nations', the Congress has only been too willing to accept the Bush approach of unilateral action against such states as Iran and Syria. In October 2007, President Bush approved unilateral sanctions against Iran and its Revolutionary Guard. Tension in the Gulf region has also raised fears that an attack on Iran is becoming increasingly likely before President George Bush leaves office. Even Pakistan, the Bush Administration's constant ally on the frontlines of its 'war on terror', fell under the Democrat pinch when the Congress approved the bill on "implementation of the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act", whose section 1442 on Pakistan specifically calls for annual presidential 'good conduct' certification.

In as much as the 'war on terror' is concerned, both the Republicans and the Democrats consider it to be the top national agenda. This has become obvious in the light of the statements by Democrat presidential candidature hopefuls like Senator Hillary Clinton and

Senator Barack Obama who have talked of taking this war into the territory of Pakistan – the US ally at the frontline in Afghanistan. No doubt there will be a price for Congressional party politics. However, it will not be paid by either the Democrats or the Republicans, or their electorate. It will be paid by the people in Africa, the Middle East, the Gulf, Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the point that needs to be understood with utmost clarity by all those expecting any difference of approach in foreign policy by the Democrats.

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