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House leaders work to sway fence-sitters in showdown over war

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March 23, 2007

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0703230187mar23,1,6705318.story?coll=chi-newsnationworld-hed>

WASHINGTON -- As the House opened debate Thursday on a proposal that would force the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq by September 2008, Democratic leaders scrambled to round up the votes they need in their biggest showdown to date with the White House over the war.

The fate of the legislation, which is expected to come to a vote Friday, is unclear. Several Democrats chafe at the idea of supporting a measure--a \$124 billion spending bill for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars--that gives more money to an increasingly unpopular cause and many Republicans deride the plan as a mandate for failure.

But the Democratic leadership appeared to gain momentum late Thursday when Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) announced that the Out of Iraq Caucus, a group of legislators who support cutting off funding of the war and want the troops home sooner, has released members to vote in favor of the legislation.

Waters would not say how many from the caucus would vote for it, but she said several members would vote with the House Democratic leadership in favor of the measure.

"We told them, 'If you really feel uncomfortable voting no, you are released to vote yes,'" said Waters, who nonetheless said she plans to vote against the measure. "We don't want you to be in a position that you feel you're undermining your political career."

Divided aspirations

Still, the Democrats' struggles with the bill highlight the divisions within the party on how to rein in the war, despite the widespread belief that anti-war sentiment propelled the Democrats to their takeover of Congress in the November election. Conservatives are concerned about withdrawing troops, and liberals do not want to vote for continued spending.

The September 2008 deadline is part of the spending bill, and the new Democratic majority has added billions in non-military appropriations to persuade moderate Republicans and Democratic fence-sitters to vote in favor of it. Meanwhile, the Senate Appropriations Committee passed a similar measure that calls for troops to be pulled out by March 31, 2008.

One of the first Democrats to speak during Thursday's debate, Rep. James McGovern of Massachusetts, acknowledged he was supporting the legislation with some reservations.

"This is not the bill I want," said McGovern, who favors a more rapid redeployment of U.S. troops. "This is not the bill I would have written. Quite frankly, I have concluded that this is the best bill we can do for now."

The White House warned Democrats again Thursday that President Bush would veto the legislation and said Democrats were putting troops in peril by not quickly passing a spending bill to pay for the war. Defense Secretary Robert Gates added that any delay in passing the spending bill would have an "adverse" effect on the troops.

Bush said, "Congress needs to get their business done quickly, get the moneys we've requested funded, and let our folks on the ground do the job."

House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) said it was "unseemly" that the Democrats have added about \$22 billion in spending to the legislation that is unrelated to the war. Among the extraneous earmarks are funding for spinach subsidies, peanut storage facilities and milk and cattle programs.

"I think history will treat this bill as one of the most dangerous derelictions of congressional duty," Boehner told reporters before the debate.

Swaying the undecided

House leaders have been scrambling all week to muster enough votes to pass the legislation. But they have been stymied by some in their party who have said the legislation doesn't go far enough and others who were hesitant to get behind a proposal that could be construed as handcuffing commanders on the ground in Iraq.

Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-Ill.), who is among the fence-sitters, said he was most concerned about setting a date for when combat troops would have to pull out of Iraq. He said he was also concerned that a precipitous pullout could lead to a humanitarian crisis. But late Thursday, aides said Lipinski was leaning toward voting in favor of the measure.

Others, such as Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-Calif.), said the Democrats won the midterm elections by campaigning on the promise that they would push to change the course in Iraq and need to follow through.

"The public didn't elect us to bring our troops home in 2008," she said. "They voted for us to bring our troops home now."

Rep. Jose Serrano (D-N.Y.) described the vote as the most difficult one he has faced in his 33 years in politics, but he said that, in the end, he believed it to be best way forward.

"This is the best vehicle for ending the war, and that is why I am voting for it," Serrano said.