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Will Congress put limits on Iraq funding?

Decision pending on \$100 billion with strings attached — or without



Chris Graythen / Getty Images file

NBC VIDEO



• **Bush: We are on offense in Iraq**
Feb. 15: President Bush delivers a speech on U.S. military strategy Thursday in Washington.

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Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., seen here at a Jan. 29 hearing, said Thursday she'd be hesitant to support the limits on funding the Iraqi deployment proposed by Rep. John Murtha, D- Pa.

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WASHINGTON - In the congressional maneuvering with President Bush over Iraq, both Bush and his adversaries agree that the vote next month on his request for \$100 billion in emergency funding is the crucial moment.

"This vote (on the \$100 billion) will be the most important vote in changing the direction of this war; this vote will limit the options of the president and should stop the surge," Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., the Democrats' leading voice on Iraq policy, said Thursday.

In a webcast on the web site of anti-war group MoveCongress.org Thursday, Murtha urged people to not exaggerate the importance of the House vote Friday on a non-binding resolution opposing Bush's policy.

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"We have to be careful that people don't think this (non-binding resolution) is the vote," Murtha said.

"We want them (House members) to vote for this resolution... but having said that, the real vote will come on the legislation we're putting together," he said.

In politics, as in chess, successful players think three moves ahead.

Here's how the moves seem likely to play out over the next several weeks:

- Led by Murtha, the Democratic-controlled House will vote to approve the \$100 billion in funds next month, but will attach conditions to the funding such as limiting the length of deployment of soldiers and Marines, requiring the Army chief of staff and Marine Corps commandant to certify that units are sufficiently trained and equipped before being dispatched to Iraq, and perhaps requiring that Bush close the detainee center at Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba.
- Next, the \$100 billion bill, with the Murtha limits attached, would go to the Senate. But comments of senators in both parties Thursday indicated it is unlikely that a bill with Murtha's conditions would get the 60 votes needed to ensure passage.
- If the Senate OKs the \$100 billion without Murtha's conditions, House Democrats, most of whom oppose Bush's policy, would have to choose whether to go along and approve the funds.

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Murtha versus McCain

"This non-binding legislation is an opinion," Murtha explained Thursday. "But the legislation I'm putting together, first of all, puts restrictions on the president, on the administration saying, 'You can't send people back into battle until they've had a year at home.'"

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"If they can't extend people, if they can't send people back, that don't have equipment and so forth, they can't continue the surge," he said.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said Thursday he opposes Murtha's idea of forcing generals to certify that specific units were ready to go to Iraq. McCain said he trusted Bush and military officers to ensure readiness.

"I have great respect and admiration for Jack Murtha, but he wants us out (of Iraq), so is his object to get us out of Iraq, or is his object to ensure the readiness of the troops that are going? I think that's a legitimate question," McCain said.

NBC VIDEO

• Murtha's plan

Feb. 15: Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., proposes his own Iraq plan that includes certifying all new troops as "combat ready" before they are deployed.

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One key centrist-conservative Democrat, Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, sounded doubtful when asked about Murtha's limits on funding.

"I think Congress has to be very careful micro-managing battlefield tactics," she said. "I have never seen any time in history where Congress tried to micromanage battlefield operations, and I just would be hesitant" to do so.

Landrieu stands for re-election next year and many observers see her as the most vulnerable Democratic senator up in 2008.

Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, also sounded cautious about the Murtha approach: "I'd have to see the language and see just exactly how it would work operationally, because I don't obviously want to deny any of our troops the ability to have funding."

Odds for limits on funding

If key centrist senators such as Snowe and Landrieu do not support the Murtha-type conditions, they would almost certainly be stripped from the \$100 billion spending bill.

So, faced with a straight up-or-down vote on a \$100 billion with no conditions attached, will the Democratic-led Congress continue to pay for a war which the majority of Democrats oppose?

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A vote by Congress to OK the \$100 billion would likely add momentum to a Democratic presidential contender who unabashedly says "Cut off the funds; end the war."

In an e-mail to his supporters Wednesday, Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards demanded that Congress "force an immediate withdrawal by using funding caps to restrict the total number of troops in Iraq to 100,000, which would require an immediate drawdown of 40,000-50,000 combat troops without stranding or under-funding a single soldier still in Iraq."

Building the pressure for the \$100 billion, Bush said at his press conference Tuesday, "Soon Congress is going to be able to vote on a piece of legislation that is binding, a bill providing emergency funding for our troops. Our troops are counting on their elected leaders in Washington, D.C. to provide them with the support they need to do their mission."

Democrats: Focus on non-binding measure

Democrats Thursday expressed irritation that both the president and some reporters were looking beyond Friday's House vote on the non-binding resolution of disapproval of Bush's policy.

The resolution, certain to be approved by the House, will have no legally binding effect on Bush or on the funds for the war.

Nonetheless one senior Democrat insisted the non-binding resolution is significant.

Referring to the use of the word "non-binding," Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., said, "I'm so tired of hearing this adjective *ad nauseum*."

He called the resolution "terribly binding" because it would reflect the will of the House.

When asked about Bush's focus on the \$100 billion in funding and not on the non-binding resolution, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said Bush "is jumping way ahead."

NBC VIDEO



- Bush urges Congress to pass war funds
- Feb. 14: Shrugging off congressional debate on a nonbinding resolution opposing his Iraq policy, President Bush says U.S. troops are counting on lawmakers to provide them the funds they need to win.

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4	Memphis mayoral election
20	Louisiana gubernatorial primary

Asked about Murtha-type limits on funding, Reid said he did not know about them.

"You've got to get this in your heads," Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y. impatiently told reporters Thursday. "It's a process; there is not one step, there is not one magic bullet, there is not one vote. Go talk to Sen. Kennedy about what happened with (the) Vietnam (war). He's talked to all of us. It took a while to build up the pressure.... We don't have 67 votes (a veto-proof majority) to legislatively affect something because the president will veto it."

But with repeated votes opposing Bush's Iraq policy, Schumer predicted Democrats would "step by step ratchet up the pressure on the president" to pull U.S. troops "out of harm's way" and away from "policing a civil war" to what Schumer called "anti-terrorism, force protection and training of Iraqi soldiers."

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