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Lawmakers defend foreign policy efforts

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Critics say trips undermine US

By Susan Milligan and Rick Klein, Globe Staff | January 1, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Frustrated with the Bush administration, members of Congress are traveling to countries with poor diplomatic relations with the United States to conduct their own negotiations with leaders the president has refused to meet.

In recent weeks, representatives and senators -- including three from Massachusetts -- have gone to places including Syria, which the United States has denounced for its interference in Lebanon and Iraq, and Cuba, where travel by US citizens is severely restricted.

Representative William D. Delahunt, a Quincy Democrat who has met several times with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, is mulling another visit to discuss US-Venezuela relations with the leader who called President Bush "the devil" at a UN session in September.

Meanwhile, Senator John F. Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, has expressed an interest in going to Iran, which the Bush administration refuses to negotiate with until it stops its nuclear program.

Nevada Democrat Harry Reid, incoming Senate majority leader, is now leading a six-member delegation to Latin America, and has already met with Bolivian president Evo Morales, a leftist friendly with Chávez and Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.

The members of Congress -- mostly Democrats, but including some Republicans as well -- defend their trips, saying they are asserting the legislative branch's role in monitoring foreign policy and maintaining a dialogue with countries whose policies have enormous implications for the United States.

But critics say the meetings undermine American strategy and play into the hands of foreign leaders seeking to weaken the Bush administration's resolve.

"It's nearly always counter-productive," said Ian Cuthbertson, a counter-terrorism specialist with the World Policy Institute. "They've given encouragement to these regimes."

White House spokesman Tony Snow slammed three Democratic Senators, including Kerry, who traveled to Syria in December, saying the visit was "not helpful" and "not appropriate" given the fact that the United States has not had high-level diplomatic relations with the Middle Eastern nation since late 2004.

"Even lending a further specter of legitimacy to that government undermines the cause of democracy in the region," Snow said.

Representative James McGovern , a Worcester Democrat active in Latin American affairs, said the administration was very clear in private communications that it did not want him to go on a recent trip to Cuba.

McGovern went anyway, along with the largest delegation to visit Cuba since the revolution, and lawmakers said the bipartisan group gleaned information about the medical condition of Castro that might not otherwise have been learned.

The United States has an office in Cuba, but does not have an embassy or ambassador there.

Members of Congress have gone on foreign trips for many years, but analysts and lawmakers said Democrats in particular have been eager to travel to hot spots recently because they are unhappy with the Bush administration's foreign policy. Several specialists said they could not remember a time when lawmakers were making so many trips to places where the United States has such delicate or poor relations with the nations' leaders.

Further, the current administration has been more likely than others to avoid dialogue with certain regimes as punishment for bad behavior, according to foreign policy analysts.

Ronald Reagan called the former Soviet Union an "evil empire," but "he still talked to them," and Richard Nixon went to communist China, noted Lawrence Korb , a senior Reagan administration Defense Department official who is now with the liberal Center for American Progress.

But "this administration seems to think that if you talk to someone, it legitimizes them," Korb said. "That's why you see a lot of members of Congress worried about that and taking matters into their own hands."

Michael Hudson , professor of Arab studies at Georgetown University, said the White House's disdain over congressional involvement in foreign relations "is an institutional bias that goes back a long way. Presidents, no matter who they are, get really irritated when the guys from the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue start mucking around" in international affairs, although the visits can produce helpful insights, Hudson said.

While the administration may not approve of lawmakers meeting with troublesome regimes, the president can benefit from intelligence the representatives gather there, said Robert Keeley , a former career diplomat who served as ambassador to Greece, Zimbabwe, and Mauritius.

"My own opinion is, the more contact, the better, and if our own administration is unwilling to talk to these people, and if our accredited diplomats can't talk to them, [members of Congress] can at least pick up information," Keeley said.

McGovern, who has been visiting Cuba since 1979, said he has noticed a substantial change in the island nation since that time, including what he described as a greater openness to religious practice. But the Bush administration "is not interested in fact-finding. They're not interested in the truth of the situation. They're only interested in the status quo," McGovern said.

The administration -- along with many Cuban-Americans -- assert that isolating Cuba from the rest of the world is the best way to promote opposition to Castro's regime.

Kerry, who met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in December, said "having the conversation -- a fact-finding conversation, which is not a negotiation -- takes nothing away from the administration." He said that Assad made specific commitments of help in Iraq, offers Kerry said he

will relay to government officials in Washington.

Senator Christopher J. Dodd , a Connecticut Democrat who made the Syria trip with Kerry, called it "offensive and foolish" for the administration to plainly reject talks with Syria, particularly in light of the Iraq Study Group's recommendation that the Bush administration enlist the help of Syria and Iran in quelling violence in Iraq.

The State Department has helped lawmakers arrange the trips, setting up meetings and providing military planes to Cuba, where US commercial planes are not permitted to go. But "it doesn't mean that we support the fact that they are there or having these discussions," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

However, the State Department included Kerry and Dodd's trip as a "highlight" in its weekly progress report on increasing international support for the US-led mission in Iraq, indicating that the administration sees some value in the unsanctioned visits.

Delahunt said he was asked to brief administration officials about a trip he made to Venezuela after the unsuccessful coup attempt against Chávez in 2002, but otherwise he has relayed intelligence to US diplomatic officials on an informal basis.

And while in the countries he tries to make it clear that he isn't speaking for the president. ■

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