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Faced with the failure of Bush's "surge"

Congressional Republicans, Democrats prepare fallback Iraq war strategy

By Patrick Martin

7 July 2007

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New Mexico Senator Pete V. Domenici became the latest Senate Republican to publicly break with the Bush administration and call for a change in US strategy in Iraq, including a pullback in combat operations.

Domenici was following in the footsteps of Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, who declared the Bush "surge" in Iraq a failure in a speech on the Senate floor June 25, and Senator George Voinovich of Ohio, who issued a statement making similar criticisms a day later.

That the influx of nearly 30,000 additional US troops has failed to stem sectarian warfare or stabilize Baghdad was underscored by press reports Thursday that the number of unidentified bodies found on the streets of the capital in June was 41 percent higher than in January, prior to the launching of the "surge." Meanwhile, US troops suffered the highest level of fatalities for any three-month period since the beginning of the war during the period from April through June.

A group of at least five Republican senators has joined with a like number of Democrats in backing a resolution authored by Ken Salazar, a Colorado Democrat, and Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican, that would adopt the recommendations of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group and make them government policy.

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A similar resolution has been introduced by two Democrats and two Republicans in the House of Representatives, following a House vote last month to provide \$1 million to reestablish the Iraq panel that was co-chaired by former secretary of state James Baker, a Republican, and Democratic former congressman Lee Hamilton.

This Senate resolution, which suggests but does not mandate a withdrawal of combat troops by next spring, has the backing of several Republicans facing reelection in 2008 from states where antiwar sentiment is dominant, including John Sununu of New Hampshire and Susan Collins of Maine. New Hampshire's other Republican senator, conservative Judd Gregg, is also supporting the resolution, as well as Robert Bennett of Utah.

With senators like Chuck Hagel of Nebraska and Gordon Smith of Oregon already having voted for one or another Democratic-sponsored measure to change the Bush administration's war priorities, that brings to at least ten the number of Republicans who have publicly broken with the White House over Iraq policy. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "With the Senate's 49 Democrats nearly united, the chamber is inching toward the 60 votes needed to pass a bill to force the president to adopt a new strategy."

Many more could defect if, as expected, Senator John Warner of Virginia, the ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee long considered the voice of the Pentagon on Capitol Hill, associates himself with one or another proposal to force a change in the conduct of the war. Warner praised Lugar's speech and indicated he would make his own statement when the defense authorization bill comes to the Senate floor during the week of July 9. The Salazar-Alexander resolution, now endorsed by Domenici as well, is expected to be offered as an amendment to that legislation.

There should be no illusions that what is motivating these Republicans or their Democratic counterparts is any sympathy for the mass antiwar sentiment of the American people. The congressional leaders and presidential candidates of both parties regard the growth of antiwar sentiment with alarm and seek to direct it along politically safe channels that will not threaten the fundamental interests of the US ruling elite.

Millions of working people and youth in the United States are beginning to understand the war in Iraq as a monstrous crime, not a mistake. They are sickened both by the loss of life among American troops and the catastrophe which the US invasion has produced for the Iraqi people. And they recognize that the Bush administration lied about weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda in order to conceal the real motives for the conquest of a

country with the third largest oil reserves in the world.

Senators like Domenici, Lugar and Warner, by contrast—as well as Democrats such as Harry Reid, Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton—are deeply concerned that the Iraq war has severely damaged the position of American imperialism both internationally and at home, and they seek a new course of action to salvage what can be saved from the wreckage.

Lugar spelled this out most clearly in his June 25 speech, when he rebuked the Bush administration for neglecting “our vital interests” in favor of “an unquestioned devotion to an ill-defined strategy of ‘staying the course’ in Iraq.” He listed four primary objectives: maintaining access to Persian Gulf oil, preventing Iranian hegemony of the region, limiting the loss of US credibility worldwide, and the politically obligatory reference to preventing Iraq from becoming a base for terrorism.

Lugar warned that continuation of the current course in Iraq could foreclose the possibility of an orderly redeployment of the US military in Iraq and result in a panicky retreat that would have devastating consequences for the authority of the US around the world. He also pointed to the dangerous domestic political implications of continuing the current military escalation in the midst of a presidential election.

On Tuesday, two days before Domenici issued his statement, the *Wall Street Journal* published a front-page article reporting that Bush’s secretary of defense, Robert Gates, a member of the Iraq Study Group before being nominated by Bush to replace ousted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, was working to forge a bipartisan political consensus for a “long-term US presence in Iraq.” The article said that Gates supported a reduction of US combat troops in the country by the end of Bush’s term. The *Journal* described the strategy being advanced by Gates as “a more modest attempt to contain the civil war, rather than the current effort to end the conflict.”

The article continued, “A smaller force of American troops, operating out of large bases far from Iraq’s major cities, would focus on battling Al Qaeda, securing Iraq’s borders and training the country’s struggling security forces.” This is tantamount to abandoning the attempt to establish a stable, multi-ethnic government subservient to the US and allowing the sectarian war fueled by the US invasion and occupation to rage, while the US military secured control of Iraq’s oil resources and positioned itself to launch attacks on Iran or other countries in the Middle East considered to be obstacles to US domination of the region.

At a Thursday news conference in Albuquerque where he announced his change of position on Iraq, Domenici claimed that it was the product of conversations with the family members of soldiers from his state killed in Iraq, combined with an assessment that the Iraqi government was not able to resolve the political crisis in the country produced by the US invasion.

“We cannot continue asking our troops to sacrifice indefinitely while the Iraqi government is not making measurable progress,” Domenici said. “I do not support an immediate withdrawal from Iraq or a reduction in funding for our troops. But I do support a new strategy that will move our troops out of combat operations and on the path to coming home.”

These comments echo Democratic criticisms of the US-installed regime in Baghdad—including, among other things, its failure to adopt legislation demanded by Washington to privatize the oil industry and open it up to American corporations. One of the most unsavory aspects of the congressional “debate” over the war is the effort to place the blame for the catastrophe on the Iraqis, thus diverting attention from those with the real responsibility, the war criminals in the White House and the Pentagon and their accomplices in both parties on Capitol Hill.

Domenici recounted a discussion with the father of a soldier killed in Iraq, who told him, “I’m asking you if you couldn’t do a little extra, a little more, to see if you can’t get the troops back. Mine is dead, but I would surely hope that you would listen to me and try to get the rest of them back sooner.”

“That’s what I’m beginning to hear,” Domenici added. “I heard nothing like that a couple of years ago. I think that’s the result of this war dragging on almost indefinitely.”

This account is obviously self-serving, since there is no indication from his previous record that Domenici cared more about the three New Mexico soldiers killed since his last vote to uphold the White House position on the war than he did about the 28 soldiers from his state who died in the preceding four years.

Moreover, non of the congressional critics of Bush’s war policy, from either party, has raised the slightest protest against the current bloodbath being carried out by the US military in towns such as Baqubah and parts of Baghdad.

But there is little doubt that the bloody consequences of Bush’s war of aggression are having an ever-deeper impact on public consciousness all over

the country. In New Mexico, for instance, nine soldiers have died since January 1, 2007, a larger death toll in six months than in any previous full year. This is one measure of the impact of the "surge" in Iraq on the American people.

The latest CBS News poll reported record levels of popular opposition both to the war and the Bush administration. On the war, the largest category of respondents, 40 percent, favored an immediate reduction in US troops, while Bush's approval rating registered a record low of 27 percent.

Even more alarming for the ruling elite were indications of growing popular hostility to the entire political set-up in the US, and signs that opposition to the war was merging with broad social and economic discontent. The poll found that 75 percent believed the country was "on the wrong track," the highest figure ever recorded since CBS News began asking the question decades ago.

This popular pressure has certainly had an effect on Senate Republicans. A mood verging on panic has emerged in regard to the 2008 election campaign. As right-wing columnist Robert Novak noted this week, "It is difficult to exaggerate the pessimism about the immediate political future voiced by Republicans in Congress when not on the record. With an unpopular president waging an unpopular war, they foresee electoral catastrophe in 2008, with Democratic gains in both the House and Senate and Hillary Clinton in the White House."

Domenici has ample reason to be concerned about the growth of popular hostility to the war. He is facing an increasingly difficult reelection challenge, despite his status as a five-term senator, because of antiwar sentiment in New Mexico and his own close links to some of the more sordid crimes of the Bush administration. Domenici is the senator most closely linked to the White House purge of US attorneys, with testimony before congressional committees that he demanded the ouster of Albuquerque's US attorney, David Iglesias, because Iglesias declined to bring a politically motivated corruption case against a Democratic officeholder on the eve of the 2006 election.

Of the eleven Republicans already considered shaky from the standpoint of the White House, seven—Domenici, Alexander, Warner, Collins, Smith, Sununu and Hagel—are up for reelection in 2008. An eighth senator facing reelection next year, Norm Coleman of Minnesota, has said he will reconsider his position in September, when the Bush administration delivers its report on the outcome of the "surge."

Although mounting antiwar sentiment is a major driving force of this political crisis for the ruling elite, the defeat of the Republicans and the election of a Democratic president and Congress would not result in an end to either the war in Iraq or to the broader project of establishing US imperialist domination over the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The Democrats, like the Republicans, are a party of the ruling financial aristocracy, unshakably committed to the defense of US imperialist interests. The Democratic-controlled Congress has already repeatedly refused to use its legislative control over government finance and policy to force an end to the war, and all the major Democratic presidential candidates, whatever their tactical differences with Bush, are committed to maintaining a large-scale US military presence in Iraq for the foreseeable future.

In the final analysis, the efforts of Domenici, Lugar and their Democratic counterparts are aimed at achieving a bipartisan agreement to continue the US occupation of Iraq throughout the remainder of Bush's term in office and into the next administration, regardless of the horrific cost in lives and in defiance of the sentiments of the vast majority of the American people.

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