

Antiwar Caucus Wants to Be Heard Now

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By [MICHAEL LUO](#)

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WASHINGTON, March 2 — About a dozen members of the Out of [Iraq](#) Congressional Caucus gathered on a sunny day last summer on the terrace outside the Capitol for a news conference. The only problem: no reporters showed up.

The members of the group, made up entirely of House Democrats, cracked jokes among themselves before heading back inside, chalking it up as another failed attempt to get noticed.

“I had 30 press conferences where no one showed up,” said Representative Maxine Waters, a California Democrat who leads the 75-member caucus in the House.

Now, with a change in power in Congress and a new military strategy to increase the number of American troops in Iraq, the members of the group — most of them liberals — are suddenly much in demand, finding themselves at the center of the debate over the war.

Yet even with a majority of Americans opposing the war, the caucus is struggling to overcome its fringe image and is becoming increasingly frustrated by what its members say is the Democratic leadership’s unwillingness to heed their calls for decisive action to the end the war.

At the same time, though the members are united in their desire to bring American military involvement in Iraq to a speedy end, they are still debating the best way to do so. In that sense, they reflect the broader struggle among Democrats in Congress, who have been unable to coalesce around a single position on how strongly to confront President Bush over the war.

House Democratic leaders this week seemed to back away slightly from a proposal by Representative [John P. Murtha](#) of Pennsylvania, chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, to limit Mr. Bush’s latest supplemental spending request for the war. Mr. Murtha’s proposal would have required strict readiness for troops sent to Iraq, essentially limiting the president’s ability to follow through on his plan to deploy an additional 21,500.

Mr. Murtha’s conditions were favored by caucus members, though it has come under fire from [Republicans](#) who labeled it a “slow bleed” strategy. The proposed strategy has also run into opposition from conservative House Democrats, who argue that their concerns need to be taken seriously because they helped deliver the Democratic majority in the midterm elections. The Murtha proposal, they said, would leave the party vulnerable to charges of abandoning troops.

“My concern, representing the state where we’ve got the highest percentage call-up of guard and reserve in the country, I want to make sure Congress does not do anything that hamstring troops on the ground,” said Representative Jim Matheson, a Utah Democrat who is a member of the Blue Dogs, a coalition of party moderates and conservatives.

Democratic leaders have responded to critics by floating a new plan that would allow Mr. Bush to waive the readiness standards, a possibility that has left many of the party’s vocal left wing unhappy. About 30 members of the Out of Iraq Caucus met Thursday to plot strategy. They warned that they might vote against any supplemental bill that did not more strictly limit the president’s options, a vote that could prove embarrassing for a Democratic leadership trying to preserve a fragile majority.

“Nothing is going to happen unless we use the power of the purse,” said Representative Jerrold Nadler of New York. “It’s time to draw a line in the sand.”

The House minority leader, John A. Boehner of Ohio, said Republicans would oppose any measure that “restricts the president’s ability to win the war in Iraq.”

Representative Barbara Lee, Democrat of California, a co-chairwoman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and a founder of the Out of Iraq Caucus, is drafting an amendment that would allow financing only to protect American troops in Iraq pending a full withdrawal under a set timetable.

Assuming the supplemental bill is unsatisfactory to the caucus, war opponents are discussing whether to threaten to vote against it when it comes to a vote in the House floor in mid-March, unless the House leadership also permits a vote on the amendment from Ms. Lee.

Ms. Lee said her goal was to shift the discussion to a “fully funded withdrawal” from “cutting off funding.”

“There’s a distinction between cutting off funding and using the funding to begin a speedy and secure withdrawal within a specific timeframe,” she said.

Created as an offshoot of the Progressive Caucus in the summer of 2005, the Out of Iraq group began with about 50 members. Its slow climb began when Mr. Murtha, an influential lawmaker and Vietnam veteran, unveiled his first plan calling for redeployment of troops in late 2005.

“The Out of Iraq Caucus grabbed onto Murtha,” Ms. Waters said. “Don’t forget, we were considered liberals and/or progressives that did not present a real threat to the administration, or even to the leadership.”

Suddenly, though, they had Mr. Murtha’s backing. The group’s numbers have since swelled, and now include a third of the Democratic majority.

The roster includes nine House committee leaders. Also among its membership are Representative George Miller of California, a trusted confidant of Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, and Representative John B. Larson of Connecticut, the vice-chair of the Democratic Caucus and the only member of the leadership in the group.

But many members rarely attend meetings. Some of its active members are lawmakers who play easily into Republican characterizations of some Democrats as peaceniks far from the mainstream. Ms. Lee was the lone dissenting vote in Congress against the resolution authorizing the president to use force to respond to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. In 2005, she co-sponsored a bill with Representative Dennis J. Kucinich, Democrat of Ohio (also a caucus member), and others to create a cabinet-level office called the Department of Peace.

With such a large tent, caucus members are hardly uniform in their views. Some are pondering whether they should simply continue to be patient. Representative Charles B. Rangel of New York, who heads the influential Ways and Means Committee, said he was not sure how he would vote on the supplemental measure.

He called the war “morally wrong” and said “it goes even beyond the brutality of slavery and the lynchings.” At the same time, he said, Democratic leaders must be careful to carve out a consensus path.

Governing as a majority requires compromise, said Representative James P. Moran of Virginia, a caucus member who also sits on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. “Hopefully we don’t have to compromise too much.”



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