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Despite Supplemental Postponement, More Funds Poured Into War Coffers

By Maya Schenwar
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In the months leading up to the anticipated winter vote on the 2008 war supplemental spending bill, activists and progressive Congress members are pushing hard to cut off funding and begin an immediate troop withdrawal. However, despite the much-celebrated postponement of the supplemental vote and legislators' promises to stop unconditionally financing the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, new funds continue to flow into the war budget every day.

Congress approved a continuing resolution (CR) at the end of September, which continues funding the war at status quo rates until mid-November, expending nearly \$12 billion. Additionally, a share of the general 2008 Defense Appropriations Bill, which passed both houses last week, may well be carved out for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to a spokesman for John Murtha, chairman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee. That sum, called a "bridge fund," has been included in Defense Appropriations bills for the past three years, and each year it has increased. The 2007 bridge fund supplied \$70 billion to continue waging war in Iraq.

Democratic House leadership has kept quiet on the possibility of additional funding, instead emphasizing its conditions for Bush's 2008 supplemental spending request, which would put almost \$200 billion toward the war. House Appropriations Committee Chairman David

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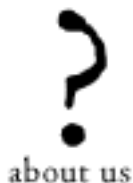
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Obey said in an October 2 statement that he would only bring the supplemental to the floor if it included provisions to end "U.S. involvement in combat operations" by January 2009. "I have absolutely no intention of reporting out of Committee anytime in this session of Congress any such request that simply serves to continue the status quo," Obey said.



However, the CR passed in September allows Congress to keep spending money on Iraq at the rate of fiscal year 2007, the most costly year of the war. Moreover, the language of Obey's statement - ending "combat operations" instead of withdrawing troops, refusing to consider a supplemental that perpetuates the status quo "in this session," as opposed to never considering one - leaves some policy analysts doubting his commitment.

"In January, when Congress's second session begins, Obey's commitment will be completely off the table," said Jeff Leys, co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence. "The Democrats can bluster all they want about not reporting out of committee a bill that doesn't have withdrawal provisions in it, but the reality is the Democrats aren't going to hold up war funding in an election year."

Obey's spokeswoman did not return calls for comment.

Passing a bridge fund - a smaller package than a supplemental - would allow Congress to revisit war spending after a few months, instead of a year, Murtha's spokesman noted. But Leys said this timing could be strategic: by funding the war in small increments, through CRs and bridge funds, and saving the supplemental vote for next year, Democrats in Congress are pushing critical votes on troop withdrawal language into the election season.

Murtha's spokesman stressed that a bridge fund would be included only out of necessity. "There comes a point in time when the bank runs dry," he said. "When it does, the people who will suffer are the troops in the field." However, according to House Appropriations Committee data originally reported in The Hill, the war could be funded through March 2008 by drawing solely from baseline defense funds.

House leaders may face opposition from the Senate Appropriations Committee if they introduce a bridge fund amendment in conference. "I am convinced that the best way to support our troops is to bring them home, and the only way to get them home may be to somehow restrict the funds for this disastrous war," said Robert Byrd, chairman of the committee, in a statement on supplemental funding in September. A

spokesman for Byrd confirmed that the senator's position holds true for all war-related spending, saying there must be "strings attached to any funding for this war."

Public opinion is on Byrd's side. In an October 2 poll commissioned by House Appropriations Committee member Barbara Lee's leadership PAC, 69 percent of Americans reject the continuation of unconditional war funding. A majority of that number is in favor of approving Bush's \$200 billion war supplemental spending request - as long as all of that money is used to bring US troops home safely.

"The president wants to pretend that Congress's only choice is to provide the funds he has requested unconditionally or 'cut off funding for our troops,'" Lee said at an October 10 press conference, where the poll was released. "That's just not true. We can use our constitutionally mandated appropriations power to end his failed policy, to protect our troops and to bring them home. We have the power to fully fund redeployment, and that is what we must do."

Maya Schenwar is a reporter for Truthout.org.

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