The party of defeat

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Democrats have struggled for a generation to escape the crippling public perception that they are soft on national security. Majority Democrats in the House of Representatives have now revived their party's electoral curse.

The House vote Friday for a Democratic leadership resolution opposing President Bush's plan to reinforce U.S. troops in Iraq was lopsidedly partisan. Nearly all Democrats voted for it. All but a relative handful of Republicans voted against it.

Yes, it is a nonbinding resolution, meaning it has no force in law. Bush is free to ignore it, as he already has said he will. And, yes, it contained political cover language expressing support for American troops in Iraq. Thus, as virtually all Democrats proclaimed during the House's four days of debate on the resolution, Democrats can claim that they "support the troops."

But House Democrats are now on record as formally opposing the troops' mission - a potentially decisive effort to stop the violence in Baghdad and defeat the Sunni insurgency in Anbar province.

It is no exaggeration to say that the fate of the entire American campaign in Iraq rides on this mission, and on the parallel effort to prompt political reconciliation among Iraqi factions. Unless U.S. and Iraqi forces can at least greatly diminish the terrorist carnage convulsing Iraq's capital city, the paramount U.S. objective of creating a stable, democratic Iraq won't be achieved. The complementary struggle in Anbar province is equally decisive. Defeating the Sunni insurgents and their allies, the terrorists of al-Qaida in Iraq, is vital to the hopes of stabilizing Iraq sufficiently to permit American forces to begin withdrawing.

The Democrats' passage of a nonbinding resolution opposing the troop reinforcements that Bush and his Iraq commander, Army Gen. David Petraeus, say are essential to American success is damaging enough. If Democrats now use their power over appropriations to defeat the troop surge before it can be fully implemented, the political risk to Democrats will be greatly compounded.

Starkly put, Democrats risk making "Bush's war" their war, and then losing it.

If you think Democrats wouldn't be that foolish or reckless, think again.

Rep. John Murtha, the blustery Pennsylvania pol and anti-war ally of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, is already

pledging to use his power as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee's appropriations subcommittee on defense to stop the surge by restricting the deployment and funding of U.S. forces.

Here's what Murtha said in an interview Thursday with the MoveCongress.org Web site, which represents a coalition of anti-war groups:

"They (the troops) won't be able to continue. They won't be able to do the deployment. They won't have the equipment, they don't have the training and they won't be able to do the work. There's no question in my mind ... we're going to stop this surge."

Does Pelosi, smarter and smoother than Murtha, agree?

"I fully support that," Pelosi said of Murtha's remarks.

What's building, then, is not only a political crisis for the Democratic Party but a constitutional clash over the president's, any president's, express powers as commander in chief of America's armed forces.

The Constitution wisely vests the power to command the armed forces in the president, not Congress. That's especially true in time of war. If Bush decides that sending another 21,500 troops to Iraq is necessary, that's his call under the Constitution. Congress' constitutional authority lies in deciding how much to appropriate for the military. Deputizing 435 House members and 100 senators as armchair generals to micromanage the movement of troops and the military conduct of a war isn't in the Constitution for a reason. It couldn't possibly work and would be folly to attempt.

But that, apparently, is what Pelosi, Murtha and the House Democratic leadership intend. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, scrambling Friday to push a comparable resolution in the Senate, seems to be similarly misguided.

Have the Democrats learned nothing from history?

In 1973, a heavily Democratic Congress voted to prohibit U.S. air support for Cambodia's pro-American army, then desperately fending off the Communist Khmer Rouge insurgents. In early 1975, Congress cut off all U.S. military aid for Cambodia.

Predictably, Cambodian government forces were soon defeated by the Khmer Rouge, then backed by Communist China and North Vietnam.

What followed was one of the great horrors of the 20th century - the genocidal slaughter by the Khmer Rouge of 2 million Cambodians, roughly 40 percent of Cambodia's population.

In 1974-75, an even more heavily Democratic Congress drastically cut U.S. military and economic assistance to our ally South Vietnam, even as the Soviet Union was illegally flooding North Vietnam with heavy weapons. The subsequent North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam overran our ally, took Saigon, and promptly imposed a Stalinist dictatorship that resulted in the deaths and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese.

The bipartisan Iraq Study Group, constantly, but selectively, invoked by Democrats last week as a blueprint for a phased U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, also lent support to a "temporary surge" in U.S. forces if deemed necessary. In addition, the ISG report warned ominously of the dire consequences - Iraq as a failed, terrorist state, a destabilized Middle East, and spreading regional conflict - of a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq that many Democrats favor.

If Pelosi, Murtha and Reid succeed in crippling the U.S. military effort in Iraq, and thereby contribute to defeat and disaster, Democrats would spend another generation rightly deemed weak and feckless on national security.

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