

Give surge a chance, then decide

by *The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star*

Perhaps it's too much to expect, but if anything ought to be as free as humanly possible from the taint of politics, it's war, where lives are literally at stake.

Last week Democrats in Congress proposed dueling bills to begin bringing our troops home from Iraq, or at least to get them out of harm's way in Baghdad. In the House, Speaker Nancy Pelosi is sponsoring a bill that would mandate full redeployment by Sept. 1, 2008. In the Senate, legislation has been proposed that would begin withdrawal in the next 120 days, with our troops displaced by March 31, 2008. President Bush has vowed to veto either measure.

These efforts could be viewed one of two ways. The most charitable is that Democrats are giving Bush's surge of 21,500 additional combat troops and up to 7,000 more support troops a full year to work under the command of Gen. David Petraeus. Its adherents say something must be done to get America off the dime in a conflict that now has lasted longer than World War II, and that this is the most effective way to pressure the White House off its stay-the-course path.

The more cynical view is that this is political posturing in the face of widespread opposition to the war among the American people. Its subscribers say that Democrats recognize cutting off funding for the war would be political suicide they fear it would be seen as abandoning the troops that they don't have the guts to vote their convictions and that they're going through the back door instead of the front to achieve their goal.

That politics-as-usual perception is aided by Pelosi's preferred deadline just two months before the presidential election and by the fact that Democrats have stuffed this initiative into a spending bill that also includes serious money for veterans' health care, Gulf Coast recovery initiatives, the state Children's Health Insurance Program and agricultural relief efforts. Who's going to risk voting against this measure if in doing so they come off as the enemy of veterans, kids and farmers?

If Democrats were being honest about this, they would allow a straight up or down vote on this issue alone, and not play games. That is an absolutely fair criticism. That said, it's funny to hear Republicans criticizing Democrats now for micromanaging the war from Washington when they allowed their White House to do just that for most of the last four years.

In any event, count us among the wary. First, wars don't go according to script. This one hasn't for the Bush administration and its cakewalk in the desert, and it won't for Democrats, either. Second, for those who argue that the U.S. occupation is the cause of the insurgency in Iraq, that may be, but we're not confident our departure would end it, or stop Sunnis and Shiites from hating one another. We could leave behind a bloodbath. Third, there are reports of a possible coup attempt against the Maliki government by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular centrist. It's possible that Congress' timing couldn't be worse.

Finally, this surge is but three weeks old. Wouldn't it be fairer to the troops in the field and the Iraqis who have to live with it all not to have another gun pointed at their heads, this one held by Congress?

Give this surge a chance. No, America's patience should not be infinite. If as 2007 fades it's evident that we're still not getting anywhere in Iraq, with the violence even worse, then Congress can try to make its presence felt, and still meet the above timelines.

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