Equal branch, right?

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

An invitation to a lecture got a predictable response.

On Tuesday, Democratic congressional leaders indicated they would decline a meeting with President Bush at the White House next week to discuss Iraq and a spending bill containing a troop withdrawal date.

Any hope that this was an invitation to genuine negotiation was instantly dashed when the president added caveats. He wouldn't compromise on his threatened veto. He wouldn't negotiate.

Instead, he essentially said that he looked forward to the congressional leaders updating him on how they will agree with him.

The president billed the meeting as a "way forward" but also insisted on a "clean bill" without timetables for withdrawal. White House spokeswoman Dana Perino confirmed that negotiations indeed were not on the agenda.

"This is not a meeting in order to compromise. This is a meeting to discuss a way forward," she said.

If you're missing the nuance Perino reaches for here between no negotiation and the way forward, join the club. Translated, the president and his spokeswoman are saying the way forward involves congressional Democrats capitulating. That's not an invitation. It's a summons to what is supposed to be an equal branch of government.

Negotiation is precisely what is needed here.

Yes, there likely aren't enough votes in Congress to override the threatened veto of an Iraq spending bill. A $124.3 billion Senate bill sets a March 2008 withdrawal goal. A $123.2 billion House bill sets an Aug. 31, 2008, deadline. But that veto means no spending bill, a further hardening of positions and no choice for Congress but to escalate its de-funding efforts in light of what polls show Americans want: an exit from a war begun with discredited reasoning and then horribly bungled.

The president should extend the invitation again without preconditions and to truly discuss the way forward

out of this civil war.

It's vitally important to achieve stability in Iraq. "Surge" just isn't the way. It is more than abundantly clear that Americans cannot solve what Iraqis won't.

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