# Washington busy playing war games

*by The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star*

It certainly was an interesting choice of dates for Congress to send the White House a war spending bill its leaders knew was doomed, and for President George W. Bush to veto it, as promised.

Indeed, the fourth anniversary of the day the president flew onto an aircraft carrier to celebrate his "mission accomplished" in Iraq had no shortage of political drama and gamesmanship. Like the now-laughable-and-lamentable banner of May 1, 2003, it is the saddest of commentaries on the leadership of the nation. It wasn't by accident that Democrats on Capitol Hill picked this date to send the Oval Office their pork-laden, $124 billion package establishing a troop-pullout target of Oct. 1 in Iraq. They want to stick it to this Republican president in the most obvious and embarrassing way possible. And it wasn't by accident that this commander in chief timed the announcement of just his second veto in six-plus years for the evening television newscasts, so that he might get the last word of the day, as if it matters.

"It makes no sense to tell the enemy when you plan to start withdrawing," Bush said. "All the terrorists would have to do is mark their calendars and gather their strength." He may be right about that, but then he had the gall to suggest that "now it is time to put politics behind us," as if he hasn't been a politics-first president since the day he changed his home address to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., as if this war hasn't been run by political advisers as opposed to military generals.

Bush didn't gain himself any leverage with Congress. This weakened chief executive still lacks the money he needs to fight his war of choice beyond midsummer, and he can't get it unilaterally. He may have erased Congress' timeline, but in fact he still faces a deadline, this one imposed by an increasingly impatient American people and by his constitutionally mandated exit from office. If Iraq as it stands is to be his legacy, it is an abominable one.

But neither have majority Democrats and pro-withdrawal Republicans in Congress earned themselves any leverage, so long as they lack the numbers to override a veto or the will to risk the perception that they are anti-troop by cutting the war's funding.

The result is that Republicans and Democrats alike are playing a zero-sum, no-win game, because it reflects badly on both. But no party has been more victimized than the one in the middle, the one consistently exploited in self-serving photo ops and pandering rhetoric - the U.S. soldiers those politicians have sent to fight in a desert civil war half a world away. Those young men and women, who tend not to be the children of those lawmakers, have been assigned to the Middle East on behalf of a nation where the war is personally felt by so few, it sometimes seems their sacrifices are barely noticed. It's not right.

Yes, this war was built on a faulty foundation, which cannot be divorced from its current unpopularity. Yes, this administration is reaping what it sowed. Yes, this president and vice president should have been better

students of history, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of their predecessors. That said, there is nothing that can be done now to rewrite the years 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006. Fortunately, 2007 remains salvageable.

Gen. David Petraeus, our commander in Iraq, has said he needs until September to gauge the success of this surge. No doubt many plan on holding him to that. In the interim, sooner rather than later, Democrats and Republicans must give Petraeus and the troops under his direction what they need to achieve a stable situation in Iraq that will allow the U.S. to walk away with a measure of dignity and lasting peace of mind.

If our legislators can't get serious about this war, in bipartisan fashion, then it is they, not our troops, who will have failed the nation. As of today, it's hard to believe America cannot do better, on both sides of the aisle.

Reprinted from The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star.

*Washington busy playing war games by The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star*