

□ The House Inches Toward A War Vote

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WASHINGTON -A meeting of the House Democratic caucus broke up shortly after lunchtime. Before the doors swung open, a booming round of applause could be heard inside the room in the basement of the Capitol.

The accolades were for Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California for working to lasso the widely varying views on Iraq among her fellow Democrats.

But applause doesn't necessarily mean that the Democrats have sealed the 218 votes needed to pass their centerpiece Iraq legislation on Thursday. "I'd say we're closer to 218 than we were yesterday. And we'll be closer tomorrow," said Representative Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, chairman of the Democratic caucus.

After a breath or two, he added: "If we sat here today and said we had it, we'd be lying." There is, of course, a decent poker face required when counting votes on a piece of legislation as significant as the \$124 billion emergency war spending measure for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One of the most controversial elements is a provision to pull troops from Iraq no later than Sept. 1, 2008. Representative Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat and longstanding critic of the war, delivered a speech at the closed-door meeting to announce her support for the Iraq

legislation. She has voted against every war spending bill since the 2002 Iraq authorization, but she said she changed her mind after having a "heart to heart" with herself.

"This by no means the end of the debate on Iraq," she said in an interview later.

Slowly, liberal groups also are rallying behind the plan. Moveon.org endorsed the measure Monday, which Representative John P. Murtha of Pennsylvania said was a helpful boost. (That is, after all, the venue he initially announced his Iraq proposal through.)

"Any endorsement you get from a group as influential as that makes a difference," Mr. Murtha said in an interview, walking to catch an elevator this afternoon. So how is the legislation shaping up? "We're not there yet, but this will be decided before we go to the floor."

Indeed, since Democrats control the floor, the legislation will be brought up when they are confident they have the votes to pass it. They hope that happens by Thursday.