

Dems' Iraq Group Seeks Unified Message On War

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House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) convened her "Iraqi working group" yesterday, soliciting an array of views in formulating Democrats' responses to the successful election in Iraq and the expected supplemental spending bill for the war.

The group consists of roughly 20 members and includes lawmakers who supported the president's authority to invade Iraq and those who were fiercely opposed. Yesterday's meeting, which lasted more than an hour, was the first of the new Congress, but the group typically gathers once a month, lawmakers and aides said.

Reflecting its divided membership, the group did not arrive at a consensus on whether troop levels should be reduced or if the caucus should support administration requests for additional money. But members of the group said that they were unanimous in demanding greater accountability for how funds - both American and Iraqi - are disbursed, especially in regards to reconstruction money, according to lawmakers who attended the meeting. There was also no consensus that Democrats should press the Bush administration to clarify its strategy for success and to accelerate the training of Iraqi forces. The disagreement on troop withdrawal touched on both the political pitfalls of "cutting and running" as well as the policy implications for the Middle East and the war on terrorism.

"There's a disagreement on whether you should have a withdrawal schedule," said Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.). "I haven't made up my mind on that, and that's not an easy question."

"Let's just say all views were represented," said Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), declining to elaborate on the closed-door discussion. Before the meeting, he noted that the group represented a broad array of caucus opinions. "If I am on it, they must have all views represented because I voted for the war," Berman said

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a persistent critic of the war, said she would seek to persuade her colleagues for a speedy withdrawal

"There was no group consensus. This is not something where we're authorized to speak for the caucus," said Rep. Jim Marshall (D-Ga.).

"The question is: What is their success strategy?" said Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the ranking member on the House Armed Services Committee, as he emerged from Pelosi's conference room.

Several lawmakers said that the discussion was a blend of politics and policy, with some Democrats focusing on how to wound the White House on a war many Democrats feel has grown politically unpopular. "The politics and the policy? It's all one ball of wax," Skelton said.

But aside from the disagreement on any possible withdrawal schedule, Democrats said they would demand greater accountability on how the expected supplemental spending bill will be spent.

"What happened to the \$9 billion in reconstruction money that the CPA Inspector General can't account for?" asked Murtha, citing a report his staff received from the Coalition Provisional Authority in late January.

He added, "There's great distress that nobody knows how this happened. I talked to [Ambassador Paul] Bremer on it, and he considers it an accounting problem, and that's how business is done, but I don't know."

"We have questions about the whole pot, including Iraqi oil money," Marshall said. He said that Democrats would question "the extent that Iraqis are wasting their own funds, and what the overall effect of that is."

Several lawmakers said they would pressure the administration to accelerate the training of Iraqi troops.

"There is some common ground on the demand for fiscal accountability, force protection and for helping troops out when they come back home," said Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas)

A complete list of members of the Iraqi working group was not available, but the following members, in addition to those quoted above, were seen entering the meeting: House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), Caucus Chairman Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and Reps. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), John Spratt (D-S.C.), Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas) and George Miller (D-Calif.).