

Cheers for Iraq Vote Unify A Divided Crowd

The historic Iraq election gave both sides of the aisle something to applaud during an otherwise typically partisan gathering, with Democrats pulling no punches in attacking Bush's Social Security plan.

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WASHINGTON -- Call it the night of the purple finger.

In the stand-up, stay-seated, cheer-wildly, applaud-tepidly atmosphere of the State of the Union address, the American political divide always gets one of its most thorough airings of the year, with members of the president's party leading the robust standing applause while the opposition often sits in silence.

But this year, Republicans stamped their support of President Bush's foreign policy on their index fingers, passing around a tin of purple stamp ink in homage to Iraqi voters, who marked their fingers similarly Sunday when they cast their ballots.

While both sides of the aisle applauded throughout the speech when Bush mentioned the election in Iraq, GOP members stood and wagged their purple fingers as a clear signal that the election stemmed from their president's campaign for democracy in Iraq.

But the seriousness of the war quickly came back into focus in perhaps the evening's most poignant moment, when Bush introduced the parents of Marine Sgt. Byron Norwood of Pflugerville, Texas, who was killed in the assault on Fallujah.

Bush read from a letter that Norwood's mother, Janet, wrote him after her son was killed.

"When Byron was home the last time, I said that I wanted to protect him like I had since he was born. He just hugged me and said: 'You've done your job, mom. Now it's my turn to protect you.'"

In another sign of unity over the Iraq election if not the war, Republicans and Democrats cheered when the president introduced Safia Taleb al-Suhail, a leader of the Iraqi Women's Political Council, who held up her own purple index finger in a symbol of the vote. She and Janet Norwood, choking back tears after the president told of her son's death, hugged as Democrats and Republicans alike applauded at length.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), the assistant minority leader, invited two severely wounded soldiers from Illinois to join him for the speech.

"Both parties, regardless of our differences about this war, when it comes to these soldiers, we stand together," he said.

The two GIs--Illinois Army National Guard Maj. L. Tammy Duckworth of Hoffman Estates and Army Reserve Spec. Jarob Walsh of Rushville--served as stark reminders of the war's personal cost.

With Iraq's election fresh in the minds of many of the lawmakers, a brief moment before the speech recalled America's own election. As Bush walked up the aisle shaking the hands of senators, his Democratic rival in last fall's election, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, exchanged a quick thumbs-up sign with him.

Despite those fleeting moments of bipartisanship, both sides of Congress still largely played their traditional roles.

Republicans clapped profusely and frequently as Bush recited a litany of popular conservative stances, such as support for tort reform and a constitutional amendment to ensure marriage is between a man and a woman. Democrats groaned audibly when Bush outlined his plans to overhaul Social Security.

That topic drew most of the Democrats' attention prior to the speech, with many members roaming the Capitol halls pushing their view that the president's proposal to allow younger workers to put some of their payroll taxes into personal savings accounts would undermine the safety of Social Security.

In a pre-emptive strike, a group of House Democrats, including U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** of Evanston, invited seniors and other constituents who oppose Bush's Social Security plan.

"Clearly Democrats are on the offensive here when it comes to Social Security," **Schakowsky** said. "We are going to win this fight."

Other political messages were more sublime. Illinois Republicans wore lime green wristbands to announce their support for tort reform, a cause Bush drew attention to in a recent visit to Collinsville.