

GOP to Put War Up For Debate

House Leaders Gamble Forum Will Aid Election

By Jill Zuckerman

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House Republican leaders, in a significant political gamble, are planning to hold a free-flowing debate over the Iraq war on the House floor in coming weeks, facing head-on what may be the most difficult issue to threaten pro-war incumbents in the fall election.

"We are the people's house, and serious issues of the day ought to be debated here in the House," said House Majority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio). "And a lot of members on both sides of the aisle have concerns about where we are, what is going on. Others have concerns that the whole story in Iraq isn't being told in terms of all the good things that are happening there."

The decision to hold a public debate on an issue that has sent President Bush's approval ratings tumbling and put Democrats within striking distance of recapturing the House reflects the growing pressure facing Republicans from bad news about the war. GOP leaders hope the forum will give their endangered incumbents a chance to distance themselves from the war, argue that it is going better than most recognize, or both.

Wars and other military conflicts have long triggered sharp emotions in Congress, imperiling political careers and prompting public despondency as well as enthusiasm. With the winding down of the Vietnam War and revelations about the Watergate scandal, voters swept in a new freshman class with 92 members in 1974, roiling the usually staid House with an influx of largely liberal members.

Republicans would like to avoid a similar backlash in November, but GOP House members are split on the wisdom of staging a full-blown floor debate. Boehner, the driving force behind the idea, said he remembered debating the Persian Gulf war in January 1991, when he was a newly elected member of Congress.

A 'serious debate' in 1991

"It was a very serious debate," he said. "I don't have any fear in allowing the House to work its will, and to give members a chance to say what they want to say."

Details about how the extended floor debate would work have not been settled, but the unusual discussion is expected to take place sometime after Congress returns from its Memorial Day recess in June.

With public opinion running strongly against the Bush administration's handling of the war, many lawmakers question the wisdom of shining a spotlight on the GOP's greatest liability and an issue known to incite deep feelings.

"It could be a good thing to do if people listen and the arguments are well made," said Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), who is in charge of structuring the debate as chairman of the International Relations Committee. "On the other hand, it could end up in a shouting match."

Other House Republicans are downright hostile to the idea of dredging up such an aggravating deep wound.

"It doesn't take a political mental giant here to figure it out--why would we want to have a 24-hour or a 60-hour debate on the thing that's pulling our party down and pulling the president down? It's a bad idea," said Rep. Ray LaHood (R-Ill.).

According to a Gallup poll, the public believes the war in Iraq is the biggest problem facing the nation. Despite rising concerns about gas prices and immigration, the percentage of people who say the war is the nation's top problem has steadily gone up from 23 percent in January to 29 percent in May.

Republican leaders are calculating that an open discussion can only help their cause. And some experts think they are right to take the chance.

"Americans would like their representatives to explain what they have done, why they have done it and what they are going to do," said Frank Newport, editor in chief of the Gallop Poll. "A frank talk from their elected representatives is something Americans would appreciate."

Amy Walter, who analyzes House races for the non-partisan Cook Political Report, said Republican silence in the face of Democratic attacks carries its own risks.

"The idea is, if we sit here and kind of cower in the corner, then the message we're sending to voters is, 'We're pretty much ashamed of our record in Congress'--as opposed to, 'Let's get out

there and tell our side of the story," Walter said.

But Darrell West, a Brown University political scientist, said public opinion is so entrenched that further discussion is unlikely to change minds.

"Having a national debate on an unpopular war does not help the incumbent party. It's just going to unleash a discussion that Republicans can't win," West said. "Citizens feel the war is not going well and has not achieved the objectives set out by the U.S. government, and so it's going to be a contentious debate without any way to convince the public that the current policy is successful."

The last time the House engaged in a discussion about the Iraq war, lawmakers erupted in catcalls and name-calling, with some Democratic lawmakers charging down the aisle to challenge Rep. Jean Schmidt (R-Ohio) for suggesting that Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), a decorated former Marine, was a coward.

"You guys are pathetic!" shouted Rep. Martin Meehan (D-Mass.) as Rep. Harold Ford (D-Tenn.) ran over to the Republican side of the chamber in outrage.

This time, GOP leaders are hoping for a more dignified discussion, allowing their members to highlight positive developments in Iraq, as well as the ostensible dearth of Democratic ideas.

"All the Democrats are doing right now is saying they're anti-war," said Rep. Tom Davis (R-Va.). "What's their plan? This gives us an opportunity to show who is for what."

Democrats see opportunity

Democrats say they welcome the opportunity to point out the incompetence, lies, lack of planning and absence of oversight that led the nation to war, resulted in thousands of deaths and cost billions of dollars. "The conversation will only highlight the absolute ineptitude that characterizes this war," said Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** (D-Ill.).

But opinions on the war diverge within both parties, with some stressing its noble mission and others emphasizing its problematic conduct. It's not clear how this array of opinion will play out in the course of the debate, or what kind of impression that will all make on the public.

Critics of the war from both parties, including Reps. Walter Jones (R-N.C.) and Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii), first agitated for the chance to debate the merits of the war.

Some lawmakers, such as Rep. Jim Gerlach (R-Pa.), an endangered incumbent who had not been elected when Congress voted to go to war, are hoping to define themselves apart from the White House. Gerlach has proposed a resolution calling for reports on the new Iraqi government's progress toward maintaining order, fostering economic growth and taking over operational control of the war.

"Regardless of whether you're for or against what's happening, it's important for Congress to be

more proactive in evaluating the progress that's being made there," Gerlach said.