

Senate Defies Bush on Rebuilding Plan

Baghdad May Have to Repay \$10 Billion

Jill Zuckman - Chicago Tribune

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WASHINGTON -- The Senate voted Thursday night to defy President Bush and require Iraq to repay approximately \$10 billion of a \$20 billion aid package to rebuild that country.

Eight Republican senators ignored lobbying by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell and joined 43 Democrats in a 51-47 vote to put their stamp on the \$87 billion spending bill that will also pay for American military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

"I do not believe that it is in any way unfair to ask the Iraqi people to invest in their own future by repaying the American taxpayer some of the funding used to construct their infrastructure," said Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine).

"It's very hard for me to go home and explain how you have to give \$20 billion to a country that's sitting on \$1 trillion worth of oil," said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.). "And the net result of this policy we're pursuing is that the people who died to liberate Iraq are going to be left holding the bag."

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) tried to stem the momentum for loans: "There is nothing in this amendment that will make the president's job easier or make our soldiers safer. Nothing in this amendment will save the taxpayers money or ease the burden upon the people of Iraq."

The setback to Bush's foreign policy came as the House and Senate were poised to vote on the president's controversial spending request by Friday. Lawmakers have agonized for days over the matter, with Republicans divided over giving the assistance outright, and Democrats split over whether to support the package at all.

The debate was fraught with political peril for both sides. Lawmakers said they worried about voter unhappiness with the cost of reconstruction in Iraq and the mounting deficit at home. And they worried how their opponents would depict their votes during next year's campaigns.

Ultimately, both chambers were expected to pass the \$87 billion package in some form, but it may come at a significant cost for the White House. Since formally asking for the money in early September, Bush's approval ratings have fallen significantly and the public's anxiety about Iraq has risen.

The debate Thursday was sharp on both sides. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) framed the issue as a black-and-white measure of support for the war on terrorism.

"To those who have feigned offense at their patriotism being questioned, this isn't about your patriotism, it's about your judgment," DeLay said on the House floor. "That whole debating tactic about, 'I support the troops, but'--that isn't going to cut it this time. If you support the war and you support the troops, you must vote for this bill."

But many Republicans in the Senate expressed anxiety about adding \$87 billion to the federal deficit, preferring to make at least a portion of the package a loan rather than giving it to Iraq outright as Bush has demanded.

The White House issued a statement decrying the push to demand repayment, while stopping short of a veto threat.

Loans "would slow efforts to stabilize the region and to relieve pressure on our troops, raise questions about our commitment to building a democratic and self-governing Iraq, and impair our ability to encourage other nations to provide badly needed assistance without saddling Iraq with additional unsustainable debt burden," said a statement from the Office of Management and Budget.

And Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) cautioned senators against overreacting. "Things are not going as well as some people think, and they're not going as poorly as some people allege," he said.

McCain said Iraqis will believe that Americans were only in their country for oil if the Senate requires them to repay U.S. assistance.

Last week, Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee who were agitating for Iraqi repayment dropped the plan after Bush expressed his displeasure to them personally. On Thursday, the House voted 226-200 to reject loaning money to Iraq.

Democrats, meanwhile, have become increasingly outspoken in recent days, taking Bush to task for over postwar planning that they contend has put U.S. troops in danger. This signals a political shift from earlier debates on the war, when Democrats were reluctant to challenge the president on any Iraq-related initiative.

"Initially there was a fear that a vote against the [bill] would be misinterpreted as a lack of support for the troops," said **Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.)**, who opposed the measure from the beginning. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Every day, there is more and more evidence that this administration cannot be trusted to provide for the troops."

Schakowsky said many Democrats had feared the prospect of 30-second commercials blasting them for not supporting the soldiers in Iraq. But she said Republicans should be fearful, too.

"There's another 30-second spot which is more valid than theirs: 'Representative So-and-so said there's no money for schools, but voted to spend \$87 billion for rebuilding Iraq,'" she said.

A liberal grass-roots organization, MoveOn.Org, has already produced ads attacking the administration for its handling of Iraq, and plans to run more ads in key states.

"It's our intention to keep talking about the choice that Congress made here and to hold them responsible for their votes," warned Eli Pariser, campaign director for MoveOn.Org.

Even so, many Democrats said they would vote for the spending package, despite unhappiness with Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq.

"My vote for this bill is for one reason only: to give our troops the resources they need to carry out their mission," said Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.).

The House and Senate bills would each provide approximately \$66 billion for U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere, as well as \$21 billion to rebuild both nations. Most of the money, however, would go to Iraq.

As a measure of just how important this vote has become, all but one of the presidential candidates in Congress returned to add their voices to the debate and to cast their ballots. Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) was campaigning and did not plan to return for the vote, aides said.