

Lawmakers Avoid Criticizing Bush on War

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Wary of appearing to second-guess the commander in chief, most lawmakers are carefully avoiding criticism of President Bush's handling of the war against Iraq.

Many senators and House members say they believe the war is going well. Some say it's too early to pass judgment. And a few say that even if they thought mistakes were made, they'd be hesitant to say so publicly.

"The last thing our troops need is someone saying that they're doing it (fighting the war) incorrectly," said Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee. "They need the confidence that their leadership, including Pentagon leadership, including the generals, including the admirals, are doing it right."

Skelton said if he had doubts about the war, instead of speaking publicly, he would call Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. "That's the chain of command," he said, adding that he has not yet needed to do so.

For lawmakers, clear-cut lines have emerged in what they will say and what they won't. Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have criticized the Bush administration's planning for a postwar Iraq. Some lawmakers have also urged the Bush administration to do more rebuild global friendships frayed by the debate over Iraq, such as with France and Russia.

Lawmakers have called for more spending on homeland defense than Bush had planned in his \$74.7 billion request for war funding. They are also insisting on greater controls over how the military portion - more than \$62 billion - is spent.

But few will question how the war is being fought - even as commanders in the field and retired officers have expressed their own doubts.

"The questioning of the war and the strategy is aggressively characterized as lack of support for the troops by the administration and many of the war supporters," said Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Ill., one of about 30 House Democrats who remains openly critical of the war.

Schakowsky said it will take time before other lawmakers start questioning the war. "Most members feel that two weeks is probably not the time," she said.

Democrats learned to temper criticism even before the war began. When Sen. Tom Daschle of South Dakota said Bush's diplomatic efforts failed "miserably" by not winning a U.N. resolution for the war, Republicans stopped just short of accusing him of treason.

The Democratic leader's comments "may not give comfort to our adversaries, but they come mighty close," House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., said at the time.

Asked about the war this week, Daschle said he was satisfied with Bush's strategy. "All things considered, we ought to be pleased with the progress as well as the degree to which our loss of life has been minimized."

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi was a strong opponent of the war, but this week she said, "I'm not going to make any judgments about the conduct of the war except to pray for the families with loved ones who are serving in the Persian Gulf and especially for those who have lost a loved one."

The Pentagon has helped court lawmakers by providing almost daily closed-door briefings for the House and Senate members. Rumsfeld and other top Pentagon officials have visited Capitol Hill several times a week for additional briefings. Lawmakers, including the administration's critics, say the briefings have been helpful in putting day-to-day war developments in context of the overall fight.

Those briefings have also eased any concerns that Congress's more hawkish members may have that the war isn't being fought aggressively enough.

The chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., often expressed concern before the war that military spending was too low. But he has rejected suggestions the Pentagon wasn't committing enough resources to the war.

"There will always be lots of second guessers, but I think the operation plan is sound, I think it's being carried out efficiently, I think the outcome is not in question," he said.

Lawmakers haven't debated the merits of the war since October, when resolutions authorizing the war passed the House 296-133 and the Senate 77-23. Since the war began, lawmakers have passed a flurry of resolutions showing support for the troops, U.S. allies and denouncing the treatment of American POWs.

House and Senate members repeatedly gone to the floor to praise troops and mourn U.S. casualties, especially soldiers from their own districts.