

Pelosi Survives Test On War Resolution

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Roll Call

In an effort to keep the House Democratic Caucus publicly united and prevent potentially severe damage to her party, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) successfully led an effort to block large numbers of Democrats from opposing a resolution saluting U.S. troops last week.

The leader, an outspoken liberal who represents one of the most strongly left-leaning districts in the country and has repeatedly stressed her own opposition to the conflict in Iraq, was besieged by thousands of anti-war phone calls and faced protesters outside of her office in the Rayburn House Office Building last week. But the real challenge for Pelosi came from Members of her own Caucus strongly opposed to casting a favorable vote on a resolution, which they complained heaped too much praise on the Bush Administration.

Pelosi backed the measure, even though she opposes the war and the administration's policies that led to it. But internal opposition from Members who helped provide the base of votes that made her leader, forced her into a series of last-minute emergency meetings with other elected leaders to rein in the left wing of the Caucus.

In the end, 11 Democratic Members voted against the measure, while 21 others voted present. But according to her allies, the vote against the resolution would have been much more pronounced if Pelosi and the other leaders hadn't worked to urge liberals to put the broader interests of the party first.

"She met with a lot of Members who were unhappy," said one Democratic leadership aide, who credited her with appeasing both the anti-war Members and those who support the conflict. "She said we need to support the troops and we can't be making the distinction" between the troops and the president.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), who voted present on the resolution, said Pelosi passed the test of leadership by not forcing Members to vote against their consciences.

"That's the point of leadership - to listen to everybody - and at least everybody came out and felt like they had the opportunity to have their say," she said.

That process unfolded in an eleventh-hour meeting with the Progressive Caucus in which many Members remained adamant that they would oppose the resolution. In what one senior aide described as a "very emotional meeting," Pelosi's top lieutenant, Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), told Members to express their sentiments loudly on the floor, but ultimately vote for the measure.

"It was a tough position for Pelosi," said the aide. "I've watched her enough to know where she wanted to be and what the resolution needed to be. The problem is she comes from the left, and the left is where her heart is. But she is the leader and she had to support this thing."

Pelosi turned to elected leaders including Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.) and Caucus Chairman Bob Menendez (N.J.) and other senior Members to help bring balking Democrats on board, several sources said. That group helped convince the 21 Democrats to vote "present" instead of "no," fearing that it would be politically damaging for the party not to vote for a resolution supporting troops in harm's way.

One top House Democratic staffer said Pelosi knew the political implications of the vote, and stressed as much to those Members who wanted to cast a no vote. The aide said before Pelosi's lobbying, as many as 60 Members were set to vote no.

But, the aide said Pelosi had to convince Members that "a vote against it takes [Democrats] back 30 years." That same staffer said Pelosi wasn't entirely happy with the language either, but as the leader of the Democrats knew she had to support it and play to the middle.

"I think she did as good a job as any leader could do," the aide said.

But several top Democratic aides said Pelosi, as a liberal Member herself, needed to tap all of her political muscle on a vote that was critical to Democrats in a time of war. With 32 Democrats essentially in opposition, Democrats weren't unified enough, aides said.

Democrats, they added, must appear to be strongly behind the troops even if they don't like the resolution's language in its entirety.

"She should have stepped up to the plate and said, 'This is the right thing to do,'" one senior aide said.