

Skeptics Eye New Resolution

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Roll Call

A rump caucus led by House Minority Whip Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) is exploring an alternative Iraq resolution that would enable Democrats to vote against the White House - and Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) - without appearing to oppose military action under all circumstances.

Some participants in the discussions, such as Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas), a key Pelosi lieutenant, have indicated that they have initiated contacts with Republican Members who share their concerns about the course of action being proposed by the administration. Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), who is among those leading opposition to President Bush's approach on Iraq, said he has already spoken about the matter with Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), who has emerged as the GOP's chief skeptic, though a Hagel aide said the Senator has no plans as yet to offer an alternative.

"This is going to cut some very interesting ways - ways you wouldn't expect," McDermott said of the opposition that is coalescing.

The discussions reflect a widespread unease within House Democratic ranks about the direction the Bush administration is moving on Iraq, even among those who are inclined to back the president regardless.

Members and aides familiar with the Pelosi-led discussions cautioned that no plan has been set. But the sources indicated that any alternative resolution would attempt to incorporate language broad enough to enfold the largest number of dissenters on Iraq.

Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.), who is among the Members who urged Pelosi to explore an alternative resolution, said he wants to see how the process unfolds before advocating that a document be put forward. He suggested the White House's avowed intent to work closely on language with Gephardt and Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.) may bring about "actual bipartisanship" in crafting the resolution.

But if no agreement can be reached, Rangel added, "I would not want Democrats to have to vote 'No.'"

Other Democrats believe it is necessary for the party, at the very least, to come up with a policy statement on Iraq to counter the GOP's perceived advantage on national security issues. They fret that the Iraq debate highlights this advantage while drowning out discussion of issues that play to the Democrats' strength - a situation made worse by the impression that Democrats have no substantive position in the debate.

In a secret memo hand-delivered to party leaders on Friday, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) argued that the party should put out some kind of language in order to "dispel the general perception that Democrats are 'weak on national security' and to answer the question, 'Where are the Democrats?'"

Nadler suggested language that would back "unfettered" international inspections supported by

the threat of military force, along with caution against "pushing Hussein into a corner" where he might feel he has "nothing to lose" by launching a chemical or biological weapons attack, perhaps against Israel.

"I believe that, unless we reassure voters of Democrats' reliability on National Security by a strong leadership statement, and unless Congressional consideration of an Iraq resolution is completed quickly, the chance that we can recapture the House and hold the Senate will be very substantially diminished," Nadler wrote in the memo, which was obtained from a leadership source by Roll Call.

The White House on Thursday delivered to Capitol Hill a document described as a draft resolution on Iraq. President Bush indicated in a meeting earlier last week with the four Republican and Democratic leaders in the House and Senate that he intends to work closely with them on final language before seeking a vote in both chambers.

The Republican leadership says a vote in the House could come as early as the first week in October.

"I don't think anyone envisions being here after the second week of October on the Iraq resolution," said Greg Crist, a spokesman for House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas). Citing the numerous divisions in the Caucus, Gephardt aides last week dismissed prospects for a "Democratic alternative" on Iraq, though they indicated that the Missouri lawmaker would support Members who might want to put forward their own.

But with Gephardt aligned with the Bush administration on Iraq, he is as much a target as the White House for skeptics and Bush's opponents inside the Democratic Caucus.

This unusual dynamic was on vivid display during a private, two-hour Caucus meeting on Iraq on Wednesday. Sources in the meeting said McDermott and Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), the chairman of the Progressive Caucus, distributed pieces of paper - individualized for their allies in the room - with questions to throw at the leader.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a Chief Deputy Whip and a firm opponent of "unilateral action" by the United States, said the draft resolution sent to the Hill on Thursday had elicited ripples of doubt and concern across the entire spectrum of the Caucus.

"I read the president's resolution as saying, 'My way or the highway,'" Schakowsky said.

The chief complaint among Democrats was that the White House language was "too broad," particularly in that it could, to their mind, authorize military action beyond Iraq, as the draft states, to "restore international peace and security in the region."

Insiders speculate that Pelosi, the top Democrat on the Select Intelligence Committee, is seeking to position herself as the member of leadership "listening" to the concerns of the Caucus rank and file while Gephardt bargains with the White House. Pelosi, who has expressed public and private skepticism over whether military action against Iraq is justified, is expected to vie for the leader's job if Gephardt leaves to run for president next year.

One insider close to the discussions said Pelosi is eyeing an alternative resolution that may be put together with key lawmakers such as Reps. John Spratt (D-S.C.) and Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the ranking member on the Armed Services Committee. The source said staff-level discussions took place Friday afternoon.

Pelosi spokesman Brendan Daly would say only that the matter of whether to put forward an alternative is under discussion. "Many Members have concerns that an imminent threat hasn't been demonstrated here," he said.

Still, finding language that would be acceptable to any significant cluster of Democrats may be impossible. There are at least three competing resolutions in the works; the differences are

somewhat nuanced, but Members say they are also difficult to bridge.

"I don't think you could get five people right now to say the same thing" about Iraq, said one Democratic leadership aide who sat in on a number of meetings where the Iraq matter was discussed last week.

"It doesn't appear that you can reach a consensus in Caucus as diverse as ours," said Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-Fla.), one of the Members working on an alternative resolution.

Hastings, a member of the Select Intelligence Committee, said the president should be authorized to take action but suggested the process should be more "deliberative" and be slowed down considerably.

Hastings said he believes Iraq poses no "imminent threat" and that the current "war talk" is intended as a diversion from other issues before the electorate.

"My objective is the same as George Bush's objective - that is, to win in November," said Hastings, who indicated that he has partnered up with Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) on alternative language for a resolution.

Leading a separate faction is Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), who was the lone dissenter when Congress authorized the president to take military action against al Qaeda in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. Her group, whose membership is unclear, opposes "pre-emptive" military action by the United States and its allies and insists disarmament - not regime change - should be the ultimate goal for the United Nations.

Kucinich would seem to be the leader of a third faction inside the Caucus. While this group has yet to take a clear position, those who have participated in the Ohio lawmaker's regular meetings (which are not connected to the Progressives) appear to be focused on hurdles the Bush administration must clear before Congress authorizes the president to take military action.

To be sure, it is not even clear that GOP leaders will permit an alternative to be offered on the floor.

Given its narrow House majority, Republican leaders have restricted the ability of Democrats to offer alternatives on the floor, so as to head off opportunities for Members - including GOP lawmakers - to vote against the leadership's initiatives. With the president seeking the strongest possible Congressional backing to use as leverage with the United Nations and allies, GOP leaders may seek to cut off avenues of escape for wary Members.

Crist, for one, said it was too early to speculate on how the debate would be structured on the floor, in particular because no one yet knows what the final resolution will say. "Our objective right now is to work with Republicans and Democrats and the White House to put the resolution together," he said.