

### House Democrats Grapple With Iraq

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#### Roll Call

With Congress facing imminent debate on whether to attack Iraq, House Democrats find themselves confounded by the massive new variable that has imposed itself on the issue landscape, and with a strong impulse to change the subject as the party totters at the threshold of a majority in the chamber.

Inside the Caucus, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) is urging Democrats to "let the Iraq debate take care of itself," in the words of one source who listened to Gephardt at a meeting of the party's whip operation on Thursday morning.

Gephardt told Members in the room that Democrats will launch an intensive four-week effort - set to begin today - to move the debate back to issues that play to the party's presumed strengths, and called for the Members to show discipline in sticking to the game plan. The blitz will cover, in sequence, prescription drugs, pension reform, corporate responsibility and Social Security, sources said.

But Democrats are wary. Many privately doubt their issues will get a fair hearing in the clamor over Iraq, but also suggest the debate is too volatile at this point to project an impact this November. "It has the potential of drowning out the issues that should be under debate," Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a chief deputy whip, acknowledged.

But, she added, the debate could just as easily set those issues in stark relief, by underscoring that the costs of war could have "a potentially adverse impact" on such things as the economy and the future viability of Social Security.

By and large, Democratic strategists and rank-and-file Members have stood by their earlier contentions that the outcome of the November elections will turn on "domestic" issues - plus the conceit that voters can "multi-task," in the words of one House Democrat.

"Voters have been saying for a year that this election's about domestic issues," said Mark Mellman, a top Democratic pollster.

Mellman acknowledged that the front pages of newspapers are likely to be dominated by the Iraq question over the next month-and-a-half, but he predicted that the agenda in the fall will still be set by "a thousand points of television" - that is, the spots run by candidates in the weeks leading up to the elections.

"We've asked [the foreign policy] question many different ways," Mellman said. "Members of the

public - unlike some Members of Congress - really can walk and chew gum at the same time."

Fred Yang, another top party pollster, echoed Mellman. While he suggested an Iraq debate could "suck out oxygen" from the public discussion of the Democrats' agenda, he pointed to last year's gubernatorial contest in Virginia, where Democrat Mark Warner prevailed, as an example of how voters think in terms of dual tracks.

"People were able to transition to things that were personally important to them," though the election fell two months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks appeared to change the country's mindset, Yang said.

Privately, though, many strategists and Members are far less sanguine about how the political landscape shapes up with Iraq on the agenda.

The concern was evident when House Democrats met the day after President Bush announced recently that he would seek Congressional approval before taking military action against Iraq. According to participants in the Caucus meeting, a number of Members rose to complain about Bush having "political motives" in sending the Iraq matter up to Capitol Hill before the elections - a perspective that would appear to assume the GOP stands to benefit from having war in the forefront of voters' minds.

"I've heard the 'Wag the Dog' idea from quite a few people, including my constituents," Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-N.Y.) said.

Responding to the concerns, Gephardt warned Members, in the words of one senior Democratic aide, that "We should not say Bush is using war for political purposes, and we can't use it for political purposes."

One senior party strategist scoffed at the notion that Democrats can continue to "break through" with their agenda going into November, and suggested only a severe economic downturn could rescue the party's message at this point.

"From this point to Nov. 5, the only thing that's gonna break through is Iraq," the strategist said. "All the issues we wanted to push through in September are secondary now."

The strategist added, "I've never seen so many Democrats banking on the United Nations to save them in a November election."

Inside leadership, the debate among House Democrats is whether there should be a debate right now among House Democrats.

While Gephardt has suggested the party focus on its strong suit - domestic priorities - Members have suggested that Democrats cannot afford to appear to have no position on an issue of war and peace.

But a debate, even among Democrats, carries risks. The most significant risk, in the eyes of strategists, is that such a discussion could move the party inexorably toward its anti-war camp - and thereby set off a genuinely serious debate with the administration over foreign policy and Iraq.

Indeed, there is already a sizable segment of the Democratic base that is leery of military action in Iraq. Schakowsky, for one, claimed that on the day Bush announced he would seek approval from Congress, her office received roughly 1,000 calls urging her to oppose the president's war aims, compared with only "one or two" calls asking her to support them.

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) described a recent trip he took to Louisville, Ky., where he met with what he described as three very different and diverse groups. No one at any of the forums raised the issue of Iraq, even though the situation with the Middle East regime had been dominating the airwaves.

"It was all about jobs, all about Social Security, all about corporate responsibility," Lewis said. When people do talk to him about Iraq, he added, "They never say, 'Go in, take [Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein] out.' They all say, 'Don't let Bush go to war.'"

But those are presumably not the independent voters Democrats will need to win the majority.

Some Democrats, including Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle (S.D.), have indicated that they are inclined to push a debate over Iraq until after the election. That outlook has been pressed in the House by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), the ranking member on the International Relations Committee and a supporter of the president's outlook on Iraq.

A senior Lantos aide said last week that the California lawmaker had initially favored a "quick vote" on a resolution supporting possible military action on Iraq but changed his mind after discussing the matter with other Democrats.

"What they're afraid of is that many constituents and voters aren't supportive yet," the aide said, adding that some Members felt they "would not be able to vote their conscience" on Iraq if it came up before the elections.

Gephardt, who has himself indicated that he shares common ground with the president on Iraq, dodged questions about this concern at his regular weekly press availability last Thursday, repeating again and again that the matter needs to be "divorced" from "politics and elections." But he also indicated that he was comfortable with a drawn-out debate.

"I don't think we get very far if we try to rush a process," Gephardt said.

But other Democrats, such as Crowley, a member of the International Relations Committee, suggested that delays in the process would be pointless.

"Once the debate is there, people are going to ask," Crowley said.

