

Once willing to go solo, Bush now wants backing

September 5th, 2002

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Chicago Sun-Times

President Bush's promise on Wednesday to seek congressional approval before using U.S. military force to depose Saddam Hussein is more of an evolution in Bush's strategy than an about-face.

The pressure from congressional leadership to have a say in a war with Iraq was predictable. Whether the president has the legal authority to send troops to Iraq without congressional OK at this time is not the overriding issue. Bush's letter from his own lawyer giving him a green light was not remarkable.

The very practical matter is that Congress holds the purse strings. Bush could not conduct a prolonged military action and the subsequent necessary years of rebuilding in Iraq that will be necessary without support from Congress.

What is more interesting is Bush's public decision to try to build international support.

He is now willing to play ball, at least a little, with the United Nations and drop the solo act. The reluctance of world leaders to follow Bush to Iraq finally got his attention. Bush speaks to the UN on Sept. 12, with the focus on Iraq.

Congress, returning this week after a summer break, is finally getting into the fray. The resolution that Bush wants is not the same as seeking official permission or authorization from Congress. But it is a distinction without much of a difference, says House International Relations Committee Chairman Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.).

"The question is," said Hyde, "are we going to say 'Go ahead, Mr. President?'" If a vote were called today, Bush would lose. That is why Bush is starting a campaign to win support for the "preemption doctrine" he formulated at a speech to West Point graduates last June.

Military action in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks was a relatively easy decision. It is not clear if moving against Saddam is merely an extension of the war on global terrorism Bush launched last year. As Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) said, "What new information exists? What threat can be quantified? What has changed in recent months or years?"

I checked in with 21 of the 22 lawmakers (or their spokespersons) that Illinois sends to Washington. Many lawmakers in the Illinois delegation say they need some evidence before agreeing to hit Iraq without direct provocation.

House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), who wanted congressional consultation, said there may well be a vote before the showdown midterm elections in November that will determine control of Congress. Hyde predicted Congress will eventually give Bush what he wants.

Rep. Phil Crane (R-Ill.) will back Bush. Rep. Mark Steven Kirk (R-Ill.) is leaning yes. The only Democrat to lean yes was Rep. Rod Blagojevich, who is running for governor. The only Republican to lean no was Rep. Ray LaHood.

The strongest anti-war opposition in the delegation came from Democrats. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) said, "We should not be going in on a preemptive strike on Iraq and that is the overwhelming sentiment of my district, from Evanston to Park Ridge." Said Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. in an op-ed he prepared Wednesday, "A preemptive strike against a sovereign nation raises moral, precedent setting and legal issues." Rep. Danny Davis (D-Ill.), Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.) and Rep. William Lipinski (D-Ill.) also have reservations.

Two Downstate lawmakers, Rep. David Phelps (D-Ill.) and Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.), thrown together in a remapped district, have yet to stake out positions.

The others declining to take a preliminary position without more information are Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R-Ill.), plus House Democrats Luis Gutierrez, Jerry Costello and Lane Evans and Republicans Judy Biggert, Tim Johnson and Don Manzullo.

"I'm disconcerted," Gutierrez said. "I want to know it's not political."

Hyde was in the meeting Bush held with the congressional leaders in the White House. He said he urged the Bush team to patch over their differences and speak with one voice. Said Hyde: "All of us have to know more details. If there is not a smoking gun, people want to know if there is a gun."