

Congress Debates War as Death Toll Rises

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After more than three years and 2,500 deaths, the House embarked Thursday on its most extensive and impassioned debate about the war in Iraq, with Republicans demanding support for President Bush's course and Democrats calling for a change in direction to allow U.S. troops to come home.

Lawmakers were expected to talk late into the night, resuming their debate Friday and then voting on a resolution crafted by Republican leaders. The highly partisan resolution would shun specific timetables for redeploying troops out of Iraq and casts the war as a central front in the war on terrorism.

The spectacle of Congress plunging into a substantive, heartfelt and relatively civil debate on the merits of the war reflects the urgency that lawmakers feel about addressing what has become a volatile political situation with midterm congressional elections looming in November. Democrats are trying to capitalize on voters' disenchantment, while Republicans are trying to portray themselves as resolute and strong.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) was first to speak, casting the debate in sweeping, historic terms as a means to protect Americans from terrorists at home and to nurture a way of life.

"This resolution is about more than the war in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Hastert, who rarely speaks on the floor and votes on only the most important occasions. "It is about a global war to protect American ideals, and the democracy and values on which this great nation was founded. This resolution, like this war itself, is about freedom."

Democrats, however, called the proceedings undemocratic because Republicans would not

allow them to offer amendments. And they accused the president of politicizing intelligence, barreling into the war without a plan and making repeated mistakes along the way.

"Democrats are united in saying we need a new direction in Iraq," said House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California. "This is a war that is a grotesque mistake."

As the elections draw closer, Republicans are hoping to tout achievements in Iraq and to turn public opinion in their favor. But polls show Americans believe the war in Iraq is the most important issue facing the nation, and they have been disappointed in the way Bush and Congress have handled it.

Still, the timing of this week's debate could not have been better for Republicans. The recent killing of terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the formation of an Iraqi Cabinet and the emergence of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki may help the GOP make the case that the picture in Iraq is improving.

In the Senate, Republicans scored a quick political victory Thursday when Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) offered an amendment written by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) that called for the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops by the end of the year. The amendment was defeated 93-6.

But Democrats employed their own bit of symbolism when Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, asked for a moment of silence on the House floor to mark the 2,500th U.S. combat death, which occurred Thursday.

At the White House, Press Secretary Tony Snow called the number a "sad benchmark."

"Any president who goes through a time of war feels very deeply the responsibility for sending men and women into harm's way, and feels very deeply the pain that the families feel," Snow said. "And this president is no different."

From one speaker to the next throughout the long day of House speeches, the strategy on both sides of the aisle was clear. Republicans stressed the evils of terrorism and the need to supporting the troops, while Democrats questioned the administration's competence and credibility.

"The truth has been a major casualty of the war in Iraq," said Rep. Jan Schakowksy (D-Ill.), a founder of the "Out of Iraq" caucus. "It is worth reviewing just a few of the statements presented as truth that were told over the last four years, some remarkably being said again today, that have been proven not true, never true and still not true."

Schakowsky noted that Vice President Dick Cheney said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction; Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the war would cost \$50 billion, and Bush himself declared that major combat operations in Iraq had ended on May 1, 2003.

Other Democrats said that Congress has abandoned its oversight responsibilities, allowing the

administration to say or do anything without consequence.

"This Congress has adopted an approach of 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' with abandon," said Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.). "Democrats will never put American service members in harm's way without a plan and without support. For that, you need to sit and watch complacency of a Republican Congress."

In preparation for the debate, the Pentagon put together an unusual briefing book, laying out the case for war and providing responses to potential criticism that might arise. The book was sent to lawmakers, including anti-war congressmen, and the Pentagon later tried to recall it.

In their remarks, Republicans ticked off all the terrorist attacks that have occurred in recent years, beginning with the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut when Ronald Reagan was president and including the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States. Linking those attacks and the war in Iraq, lawmakers said the United States must not waver.

"We must stand firm in our commitment to fight terrorism and the evil it inflicts throughout the world," Hastert said. "We must renew our resolve that the actions of evildoers will not dictate American policy."

But Rep. Jack Murtha (D-Pa.), the Democrats' leading war critic, said it is time to leave the war-torn nation.

"Only the Iraqis can solve the problem in Iraq," said Murtha, a decorated Marine. "They're fighting with each other, and our troops are caught in between, and I say it's time to redeploy."