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## Anti-War Movement Stuck in a Quagmire

By [David Nather](#) | 6:46 AM; Oct. 09, 2007 | [Email This Article](#)

Over the summer, a coalition of anti-war activists racked up plenty of statistics in their drive to end the occupation of Iraq. They held 1,100 press events, by their count, planted more than 30,000 yard signs, posted 265 videos on YouTube — and harangued lawmakers in person 125 times for voting to continue the war.

And yet, the “Iraq summer” campaign didn’t break the stalemate in Congress over the war. In fact, it’s not clear that the effort changed any votes at all. When the Senate voted last month on a relatively mild proposal by Democrat Jim Webb of Virginia to give the troops minimum rest periods between deployments, it got 56 votes — the same as in July, and still four votes short of what was needed to break a filibuster.

These are frustrating times for the collection of political, veterans, labor, and grass-roots organizations that make up the modern anti-war movement. At a time when a solid majority of the American public wants to pull some or all troops out of Iraq, these groups have been unable to turn the public support for their goals into enough votes to get a withdrawal proposal through the Senate, much less override a presidential veto.

Some of the groups have made tactical blunders along the way — most famously, the MoveOn.org advertisement in The New York Times last month deriding Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, the top U.S. military commander in Iraq — that have alienated their own Democratic allies. But that isn’t why the movement to

end the Iraq War has failed to gain more traction in Congress, according to Democratic lawmakers and outside analysts of the movement.

Instead, they say, it's because the groups simply have won all the Democratic votes they're going to get. The only place to pick up more votes, at least for the next year, is on the Republican side.

And the only means for accomplishing that, it seems, is for the anti-war groups to reach out more emphatically to Republicans who have expressed doubts about the war in search of a compromise that could win their votes while keeping almost all the Democrats in the fold. "What was always missing, and continues to elude us, is the 10 to 12 Republicans who will come over to our side and help us break the logjam," said Democratic Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, one of the sponsors of the legislation to set a timetable to withdraw troops. "If there were any missing energy" in the anti-war movement, he said, "that might be where they could apply it."

### **Setting Goals**

The other option is to redirect their efforts to the 2008 election campaigns and target a group of Republicans for defeat, especially in the Senate. That approach worked well for the anti-war groups in 2006, when the voters put both houses of Congress into Democratic hands, and some in the movement have concluded that it is the only goal worth pursuing now — since Republicans aren't changing their votes.

"We need to do civics 101 and talk about what that 60 votes really means: the filibuster," said Democratic Rep. Barbara Lee of California, one of the leaders of the Out of Iraq Caucus in the House. "That 60 votes becomes a real obstructionist tactic, and people need to focus on that and do what it takes to end it."

Most of the groups in the anti-war coalition have appeared unwilling to work with Republican skeptics of the war on a plan they could all support. "They're exercising their constitutional rights, and that's fine, but by and large they aren't doing anything to help us find a positive solution," said Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, who has been pushing for goals, rather than deadlines, for troop withdrawals based on the recommendations of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group headed by former Secretary of State James A. Baker III and former Democratic Rep. Lee H. Hamilton of Indiana.

Some anti-war activists say they're just not interested in dealing with the GOP and want to apply more pressure to the party now in control. "We're looking at some of the Democrats who were

voted in on a platform of fighting against the war, and we're not really seeing that," said LeiLani Dowell, a member of the Troops Out Now Coalition, which wants to end war funding and staged a rally at the Capitol last month that reportedly drew fewer than 1,000 people.

But in the view of lawmakers from both parties, the groups have also failed to connect with potential GOP allies because they have unrealistic expectations of how quickly the United States could withdraw from Iraq.

"I think they're actually counterproductive. They don't seem very thoughtful," said Republican Rep. Bob Inglis of South Carolina, who opposed President Bush's troop increase this year but wants any troop withdrawals to be based on benchmarks of progress in Iraq rather than a timetable. Democratic Rep. Zack Space, a freshman who will be up for re-election in a Republican-leaning part of Ohio next year, said of the antiwar groups, "By embracing a kind of impractical view of the situation, I think they hurt their cause."

### **Pressure Tactics**

One group that did try to negotiate with swing-vote Republicans ended up with little to show for its efforts. Last month, Vote Vets, an organization of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, sent 40 members to Capitol Hill to try to persuade Senate Republicans to vote for the Webb amendment. Many Republicans were receptive, said Peter Granato, a vice chairman of the organization, but they still voted against it after one of their most respected colleagues, Republican John W. Warner of Virginia, reversed his earlier position and opposed the idea.

That convinced some anti-war groups that defeating Republicans next year is the only realistic strategy. Leaders of Americans Against Escalation in Iraq — the coalition of political, labor and veterans' groups that organized the "Iraq summer" campaign — contend that their efforts have paved the way for a series of retirements by Republicans who were targets of the protests, most recently Sen. Pete V. Domenici of New Mexico.

"The reality on the ground is that it's hard to change anything before the elections," said John Isaacs, executive director of Council for a Livable World, a member of the Win Without War coalition. "Just about everything was done that could be done, from the pressure in the districts and the ads to the generals and veterans going up and making their case."

But the drawback to that strategy for some is that the next election won't change the makeup of Congress for another 15 months. "I would hope it's before the ballot box" that the anti-war

movement finds leverage, said Democratic Rep. Lynn Woolsey of California, another member of the Out of Iraq Caucus. "Every day the war goes on, we lose more troops."

Right now, it's safe to say that most of the anti-war groups favor confrontation rather than negotiation with Republicans.

The movement is broad enough to include political groups, such as MoveOn.org and Americans United for Change, that run advertising critical of Republicans and focus on domestic issues as well as the war. But there are also grass-roots coalitions such as United for Peace and Justice, which organizes demonstrations and has sponsored "grass-roots lobbying days" to encourage supporters to take their case to Congress in person.

There is also the umbrella group, Americans Against Escalation in Iraq, whose members include MoveOn.org, Vote Vets and Americans United for Change, but also the Service Employees International Union; the political arm of the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank; and the National Security Network, an organization of liberal foreign policy experts.

"I think they've helped by holding our feet to the fire and keeping us focused on the war," said Democratic Rep. Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon. But to get past the repeated deadlocks in the Senate, DeFazio said he tells the groups, "Just don't keep talking to yourselves, spinning yourselves higher and higher and getting angry about what's going on. Help us broaden the base."

### **Public Discomfort**

Lately, these coalitions have been tarred by the actions of a few of its members.

The MoveOn.org ad, still proudly displayed on the group's Web site, that calls Petraeus "General Betray Us" offended so many that bipartisan majorities in the House and Senate condemned it. DeFazio, one of the most liberal members of the House, called the ad "boneheaded."

Demonstrators from Code Pink, a peace group formed just before the Iraq War started, routinely disrupt congressional hearings and speeches, drawing the wrath of even Democratic lawmakers who share their views. Last month, when members of the group interrupted a House Armed Services Committee hearing where Petraeus was testifying, Chairman Ike Skelton of Missouri angrily described them to a colleague — and to a national television audience — with a vulgarity.

Even the most anti-war Democrats are scratching their heads at activist Cindy Sheehan's decision to run for the Democratic

nomination for the House in San Francisco next year against Speaker Nancy Pelosi. They insist Pelosi has fought the war every way she can. "This isn't a weakness for her. It's one of her strengths," said one House Democrat who did not want to be identified speaking candidly about his disagreements with the groups.

Most Democrats say the groups would be better served focusing their energies on Republicans who have expressed doubts about the war but have not, so far, voted to withdraw troops. The goal needs to be "a veto-proof coalition," said Democratic Rep. Robert E. Andrews of New Jersey. "If 50 Republicans would vote in favor of a timetable, it would happen."

But most of the Republicans who have voiced skepticism about the war say they've seen little, if any, effort by the anti-war groups to find a compromise they could all support. "There were so many attempts to score media points rather than actually engage," said Phil English of Pennsylvania, one of the House Republicans who opposed the troop "surge" in Iraq. He said he has seen anti-war demonstrators in his Erie-area district with out-of-state license plates. One anti-war group, he said, invited him to a rally in August with just a week's notice — and after his schedule was full — then announced at the rally that he had failed to show up.

Some groups say they have not given up on bringing members of Congress around to their side, but many activists say they have grown so frustrated with Congress' failure to end the war that they're in no mood to try to reason with lawmakers from either party. "I think people are done being polite and obsequious with their members of Congress. People are fed up," said Sue Udry, legislative coordinator for United for Peace and Justice.

Such frustration may be a big reason Congress' public approval rating has sunk below Bush's in recent polls.

Even members of Code Pink insist they have turned to shouting down lawmakers mainly because they haven't been able to get meetings with them. "It isn't that confrontation is our No. 1 choice of strategy at all," said Gael Murphy, a Code Pink leader who said the group has been trying to meet with the Speaker for a year. Pelosi spokesman Drew Hammill said the group has had meetings with her staff, and she is well aware of their views.

### **Bringing the Republicans in**

Some lawmakers and groups are trying to get beyond the impasse. Vote Vets lobbied Republican Sen. George V.

Voinovich of Ohio, among others, to support the Webb amendment, for instance. Voinovich said he considered their case but ultimately was convinced by Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates' argument that longer rest periods would force the military to call up troops with less training.

In the House, Democrats John Tanner of Tennessee and Neil Abercrombie of Hawaii had better luck with a measure that would require the Defense Department to report regularly on planning for a troop withdrawal. The bill was intended to appeal to Republicans, and it did — all but 16 Republicans and 30 Democrats voted for it last week.

Abercrombie, a former Vietnam War protester who now chairs an Armed Services subcommittee, said the choice facing today's anti-war movement is much like the one that faced the Vietnam protesters: "Do you want to take a stand, or do you want to have an impact?"

Many Democrats and anti-war activists dismissed the withdrawal planning bill as meaningless. But Abercrombie said he co-wrote the legislation to acknowledge the practical realities of getting out of Iraq and to give Republicans a measure they could support, in the hope that it might lead to a broader rebellion later on.

"It's not a matter of what you'd like," said Abercrombie. "I'd like to be taller," he said, but "it's a matter of what you can do."

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