

Republicans Buck Bush On Iraq Benchmarks

By Jonathan Weisman
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, May 1, 2007; A05

Brushing aside [White House](#) opposition, Republican leaders in Congress said yesterday that negotiations on a second war spending bill should begin with benchmarks of success for the Iraqi government, and possible consequences if those benchmarks are not met.

Democratic leaders will send a \$124 billion war funding bill to [President Bush](#) today that would establish such benchmarks and tie them to troop withdrawals, which would begin as early as July 1 if they are not met. The bill will arrive at the White House on the fourth anniversary of Bush's speech aboard the USS [Abraham Lincoln](#), when he declared an end to major combat operations in [Iraq](#) before a banner that proclaimed "Mission Accomplished."

The administration dispatched Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) on Sunday to try to slam shut bipartisan talk of punishing the Iraqi government for not meeting benchmarks. Bush took the same uncompromising tone yesterday when he reiterated his veto promise.

"That's not to say I'm not interested in their opinions. I am," he said of congressional leaders. "I look forward to working with members of both parties to get a bill that doesn't set artificial timetables and doesn't micromanage and gets the money to our troops."

But [GOP](#) leaders did not take the benchmark issue off the table. House Minority Whip [Roy Blunt](#) (R-Mo.) suggested last week that although Republicans could not accept linking benchmarks to troop withdrawals, they could tie them to \$5.7 billion in nonmilitary assistance for the Iraqi government.

Blunt spokeswoman Burson Snyder said yesterday that it would be "premature" to rule out such a proposal, in spite of Rice's comments. "We haven't even begun substantive conversations with the Democratic leadership, so how can we start ruling in or out certain provisions?" she said.

[House Minority Leader John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio) took a similar tack. Boehner "believes members and the administration can and will discuss benchmarks as a way of measuring progress and holding the Iraqi government accountable, and that's where members need to start," said his spokesman [Kevin Smith](#). He added that "tying benchmarks to withdrawal dates or deadlines are a non-starter," but he did not rule out consequences for Iraqi government inaction.

Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.) has suggested that benchmarks be [tied](#) to U.S. troop positions within Iraq. If the benchmarks are not met, troops would remain in the country but would be removed from combat

Advertisement



Achieve

EmigrantDirect.com™

More Money
For Your Money™

► Learn More

zones.

Appearing on several Sunday talk shows, Rice said any compromise on benchmarks would not give the Iraqi government and U.S. troops the flexibility they need. Her comments left Democratic leaders convinced that the White House is not ready to negotiate on a war funding bill that includes policy changes for Iraq. Instead, Democrats will have to negotiate with congressional Republicans, hoping a measure with broad, bipartisan support would force Bush to the table.

House [Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer \(D-Md.\)](#) told reporters in [New Hampshire](#) that he has already reached out to Boehner and Blunt, a statement that Boehner denied yesterday. [Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid \(D-Nev.\)](#) and Senate Minority Leader [Mitch McConnell \(R-Ky.\)](#) held their second meeting on Iraq yesterday.

House Democrats are beginning to coalesce around a \$19 billion bill -- enough to fund the war for about 60 days -- without any withdrawal dates, according to aides. The measure would include additional funds for military health care; new standards for resting, training and equipping troops before deployment; and prohibitions on torture and permanent bases in Iraq. Benchmarks would be included, but with no punishments for failing to meet them.

The idea would be to pass the measure quickly, as soon as early next week, to deprive Bush of the argument that Democrats are withholding needed funds from the troops. Then negotiations would begin immediately on yet another bill.

Staff writer Shailagh Murray contributed to this report.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[The BlackBerry® Pearl](#)

Stylish & Small Smartphone with the Wow Factors of BlackBerry!

www.BlackBerryPearl.com