

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

CLARIFICATION TO THIS ARTICLE

A May 3 Page One article about negotiations between President Bush and congressional Democrats over a war spending bill said the Democrats offered the first major concession by dropping their demand that the bill include a deadline to bring troops home from Iraq. While Democrats are no longer pushing a firm date for troop withdrawals, party leaders did not specifically make that concession during a Wednesday meeting with Bush at the White House.

## Democrats Back Down On Iraq Timetable

Compromise Bill in Works After Veto Override Fails

By Jonathan Weisman and Shailagh Murray  
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[President Bush](#) and congressional leaders began negotiating a second war funding bill yesterday, with Democrats offering the first major concession: an agreement to drop their demand for a timeline to bring troops home from [Iraq](#).

Democrats backed off after the House failed, on a vote of 222 to 203, to override the president's veto of a \$124 billion measure that would have required [U.S.](#) forces to begin withdrawing as early as July. But party leaders made it clear that the next bill will have to include language that influences war policy. Senate Majority Leader [Harry M. Reid](#) (Nev.) outlined a second measure that would step up Iraqi accountability, "transition" the [U.S. military](#) role and show "a reasonable way to end this war."

"We made our position clear. He made his position clear. Now it is time for us to try to work together," House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) (Calif.) said after a [White House](#) meeting. "But make no mistake: Democrats are committed to ending this war."

Bush said he is "confident that we can reach agreement," and he assigned three top aides to negotiate. White House Chief of Staff Joshua B. Bolten, national security adviser [Stephen J. Hadley](#) and budget director Rob Portman will go to [Capitol Hill](#) today to sit down with leaders of both parties.

But a new dynamic also is at work, with some Republicans now saying that funding further military operations in Iraq with no strings attached does not make practical or political sense. Rep. Bob Inglis ([S.C.](#)), a conservative who opposed the first funding bill, said, "The hallway talk is very different from the podium talk."

While deadlines for troop withdrawals had to be dropped from the spending bill, such language is likely to appear in a defense policy measure that is expected to reach the House floor in two weeks, just when a second war funding bill could be ready for a House vote. Democrats want the next spending measure to pass before Congress recesses on May 25 for Memorial Day weekend.

Beyond that, Democrats remain deeply divided over how far to give in to the White House.

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House Majority Leader [Steny H. Hoyer](#) (Md.) indicated that the next bill will include benchmarks for Iraq -- such as passing a law to share oil revenue, quelling religious violence and disarming sectarian militias -- to keep its government on course. Failure to meet benchmarks could cost [Baghdad](#) billions of dollars in nonmilitary aid, and the administration would be required to report to Congress every 30 days on the military and political situation in Iraq.

Benchmarks have emerged as the most likely foundation for bipartisan consensus and were part of yesterday's White House meeting, participants said. "I believe the president is open to a discussion on benchmarks," said Senate Democratic Whip [Richard J. Durbin](#) (Ill.), who attended the session. He added that no terms were discussed. "We didn't go into any kind of detail," Durbin said.

Just four Republicans supported the first version of the spending bill: [Sen. Gordon Smith](#) (Ore.), [Sen. Chuck Hagel](#) (Neb.), [Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest](#) (Md.) and [Rep. Walter B. Jones](#) (N.C.). But a growing number of [GOP](#) lawmakers want language that would hold the administration and the Iraqi government more accountable.

"The general sense is that the benchmarks are critical," said [Sen. Olympia J. Snowe](#) (Maine), a moderate who opposed the original bill but supports some constraints.

White House officials are also looking to benchmarks as an area of compromise, but they want them to be tied to rewards for achievement, not penalties for failure.

Administration officials note that they do not oppose benchmarks, and in fact have developed them in the past along with Iraqis. But they are sensitive about provoking Iraqis, who bristled last year when benchmarks crafted by U.S. and Iraqi officials became public and left the impression that Washington was dictating to Baghdad.

But that approach would be too weak even for moderates from both parties. Already, liberal Democrats think that public opinion and circumstances in Iraq are on their side, and they view benchmarks alone as far too weak. [House Appropriations Committee](#) Chairman [David R. Obey](#) (Wis.) has repeatedly told Democratic leaders that he would not report a war funding bill out of his committee that he could not support. Pelosi is also reluctant to embrace such a compromise until she sees how far congressional Republicans are willing to bend.

Democratic leaders have resigned themselves to losing many of the liberals they worked hard to bring on board the first bill. [Sen. Russell Feingold](#) (Wis.), a leading Senate war opponent who helped to build Democratic consensus in the first round, said he will vote against the second version unless it includes "a binding approach to ending the war." Feingold is seeking a vote on legislation he co-sponsored with Reid to cut off war funding on March 31, 2008. But he added: "I'm willing to listen to other ideas."

Conservative Republicans were just as balky. Sen. Ted Stevens ([Alaska](#)) argued that any benchmarks would make the bill "unconstitutional." [Sen. Lindsey O. Graham](#) (S.C.), another unwavering Bush defender on Iraq, said he would support adding benchmarks, but with no repercussions should Iraqis fall short.

In a speech yesterday to the Associated General Contractors of America, Bush made a more extended argument that his decision to send additional troops to Iraq is bearing fruit there. He cited a decrease in sectarian violence, an increase in cooperation from local residents, and several recent operations against bombers and militias.

Bush acknowledged that violence remains high and that U.S. casualties "are likely to stay high," but he attributed that to radicals affiliated with [al-Qaeda](#) and minimized the role of sectarian conflict even as he used the words "civil war," a phrase he has largely avoided. "For America," Bush said, "the decision we face in Iraq is not whether we ought to take sides in a civil war, it's whether we stay in the fight against the same international terrorist network that attacked us on 9/11."

*Staff writer [Peter Baker](#) contributed to this report.*

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