THE HILL

A reasonable approach

By Reps. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii), Phil English (R-Pa.)
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Over the last 230 years, most of the important steps we've taken as a nation have demanded a degree of cooperation among competing interests, recognizing there was greater benefit in working together toward resolution instead of continuing to disagree. Of course, the more important the issue, the more difficult it is to convince opposing interests to "give a little."

That's certainly the case with the war in Iraq. Few issues generate the heat, the venom or the ironclad certainty from every perspective. But this war should generate strong feelings. More than 3,700 of our sons, daughters, husbands, wives, fathers and mothers have been killed. Thousands more have suffered horrible injuries. We don't even know how many Iraqis have lost their lives, and refugees are streaming out of the country. All this has come at a staggering financial cost to the country, now approaching $3 billion a week, much of which we are borrowing from our grandchildren.

This summer, a bipartisan coalition of House members worked to craft legislation requesting that the Bush administration report to Congress on its next steps in Iraq. It was a step toward acting as a Congress — not the Democratic Caucus or the Republican Conference — to engage in oversight of the civilian leadership behind operations in Iraq. Our goal is to work together instead of against each other, to define more clearly our military mission in Iraq and, above all, to represent the men and women who are serving our country in Iraq; our soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen fight not as Democrats or Republicans, but as Americans.

The result of that effort is the Tanner-Abercrombie-English bill, which would require the administration, through the Secretary of Defense, to report to Congress within 60 days and every 90 days thereafter on its planning for the redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq. It doesn't set a deadline for the withdrawal of troops, but rather requires the administration to update the Congress on its plans for redeployment. It puts Congress back in its constitutionally prescribed oversight role.

The House Armed Services Committee approved our legislation on a vote of 55-2; every Democrat and all but two Republicans. Unfortunately, some of our House colleagues argued that the Armed Services Committee vote was too bipartisan and did not meet the strict criteria established by some outside interest groups.

For all of us in Congress, the first priority is to support our men and women in uniform, no matter their political affiliation; those who have answered the call to duty and are serving

admirably in a mission that civilian leaders in the administration have failed to clearly define.

What we seek to accomplish is a common-sense, realistic approach toward planning for the next step in Iraq. Congress has a responsibility to demand that the president clearly define his goal for Iraq and the strategy he thinks is needed to achieve it. A handful of our colleagues want nothing short of withdrawing all our troops overnight; others want to blindly appropriate billions more borrowed dollars for the Iraq war every six months with no questions asked. Both these approaches are ill-advised and ineffective.

We think the majority of the American people would prefer a more reasonable approach like H.R. 3087, which we, along with our Republican and Democratic supporters, hope the House of Representatives will consider and pass so we can begin moving toward a solution as one country.

Tanner chairs the U.S. delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. English is the ranking member of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures. Abercrombie chairs the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Air and Land Forces.

NOTE: The Abercrombie-Tanner-English bill overwhelmingly passed the House floor on October 2, 2007, marking the first bipartisan breakthrough in Iraq legislation during the 110th Congress.

To learn more about English's views on the Iraq War click HERE.