

Calling for Change in Status Quo, Democrats Prepare to Wait Out Bush's Final Year

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As expected in the sorely split U.S. capital, Democrats were uniformly critical of President Bush's final State of the Union address Monday night while Republicans expressed optimism that the president's last year in office won't end in a fizzle.

The hour-long speech urging Congress to act on unfinished domestic and foreign policy priorities drew kudos from GOP members looking to send Bush out with a bang after a tumultuous two terms in office, but for critics, the annual address served as another marker passed as they wait out their Bush fatigue.

"On one hand, I am sorry to see that this president ran out of new ideas before he ran out of time. However, considering the success of some of his initiatives on foreign policy and our economy – perhaps the less damage the better," said Rep. **John Dingell, D-Mich.**

"The president repeatedly asked Congress tonight to trust the American people to create their own opportunities. But just as we must trust the American people, they must be able to share the same confidence in their leaders," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said in a joint statement.

"At a time when our economy is on shaky ground and our leadership around the world is eroding, the status quo won't do," they said.

Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., a frequent critic of the Bush administration, suggested that Americans are already looking past this year to the next presidency.

"This may have been a last ditch effort to put a coat of new paint on a presidency that lost its shine long ago, but President Bush's deeds have never quite matched his words. No matter how the president tries to portray his fiscal and economic beliefs or the war in Iraq, seven years of cold, hard facts speak for themselves,

But Republicans, who responded with 70 rounds of applause during the 53-minute annual address to the nation, said Bush turned his last hurrah into an opportunity to assure the American people he is aware of their concerns for the country.

"In the president's last year in office, I believe he stands behind the podium in a much stronger position tonight than he did last year. He has demonstrated his ability to lead our nation and take tough stands when needed. We will not see President Bush coast to the finish — we will see a strong sprint," said House Republican Whip Roy Blunt.

"Tonight the president called on Congress to act quickly on a number of key priorities, and Republicans stand ready to work together with the majority when it's in the best interest of the country. In fact, we can start tomorrow by permanently closing the terrorist loophole in our nation's surveillance laws and passing an economic growth plan without tax hikes and unrelated spending increases," said House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio.

Bush tried to appeal to bipartisanship in his speech, noting that the White House and House leaders worked quickly and decisively together to get an economic stimulus package that gives households up to \$1,200 in tax rebates this year. He urged the Senate not to mess with the package that the administration wants passed by February so checks can be mailed out in May.

Several lawmakers on both sides of the aisle said the package demonstrated that cooperation can still exist in the final year of this president's administration.

"I think the president still has the potential to do a lot," said Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Arlen Specter. "He is still the president of the United States, and with the Democrats in Congress coming forward and being cooperative on this stimulus package, I'm hopeful that that will signal a little different attitude on the part of Congress."

"I hope that this year both the White House and the Congress put partisan considerations aside and produce real results for the American people," Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., said. "Particularly at a time of war, the national interest must come before partisan interests," he said.

"We hope that the bipartisanship on the economic stimulus package that has marked the start of this new year is a sign of things to come," Reid and Pelosi said in their statement. "But the president must do much more than simply give speeches that promise progress and commit to cooperation; he must work with Congress to make it happen.

On the other hand, Bush's vow to veto any appropriations bill that fails to cut wasteful spending by reducing earmarks — pet projects of individual lawmakers attached to legislation after the bills have passed — elicited skepticism on both sides of the aisle.

"President Bush today said that earmarks have tripled in number over the last decade, but he forgot to tell the public that he signed those earmarks into law," Sen. Robert Byrd, D-Va., said. "President Bush also neglected to mention that the tripling in earmarks occurred under a Republican Congress."

"While it is true that some of my colleagues have abused the power to direct federal spending, many more have used it for good," said Alabama Republican Sen. Richard Shelby. "It is essential that funding decisions be determined by people who are elected to represent their states, not by unelected Washington bureaucrats."

Democrats were particularly critical of the speech's focus on the war in Iraq and the success of the troop surge, which began a year ago. Bush signaled that 20,000 troops will be home in the coming months without being replaced, which some lawmakers said isn't enough.

"In just a few weeks, we will mark the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq," said Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa. "Five years later, the political and economic situation on the ground has changed little, while the rest of the world, including the United States, has changed significantly. The president continues to ignore the bigger picture in Iraq," he said.

Democrats also dismissed much of the speech as a rehash of old ideas that failed to offer solutions for the future, particularly on the issue of the economy.

"The simple fact is that the state of the union has deteriorated on President Bush's watch," Sen. Kent Conrad, a North Dakota Democrat said. "Despite this failed record, President Bush continues to push for more of the same, including the permanent extension of deficit-financed tax cuts that disproportionately favor the wealthiest."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.