

# Congressional Democrats Wrestle Over How to Force Bush to Alter Iraq Policy



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By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#) and [JOHN M. BRODER](#)  
Published: February 24, 2007

WASHINGTON, Feb. 23 — Congressional Democrats, divided over how to press President Bush to alter his policy in [Iraq](#), are wrestling over whether to use the power of the purse to wind down the war, and they seem headed for a confrontation among themselves, possibly as early as next week, over a proposal to revoke the 2002 resolution authorizing the war.

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Some Democrats acknowledge that they are in a sticky situation as they try to map out a strategy that will appease the antiwar left, which is pushing for conditions on war financing, without alienating moderate Democrats and [Republicans](#) who fear being painted as unsupportive of the troops.

“We’re going to come back, regroup, find a consensus position,” a senior House Democratic aide said Friday, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the continuing negotiations. “People are unhappy with the war. We have to conduct oversight. We have to push the

president in a new direction. We have to find a way to do that that makes the caucus comfortable, and I think we can.”

In the House, moderate Democrats are uneasy with a plan put forth by Representative [John P. Murtha](#), Democrat of Pennsylvania, to attach stringent conditions to financing for the war. One skeptical Democrat, Representative Jim Cooper of Tennessee, said Friday that the Murtha plan was “as risky as catching a falling knife.”

Representative Joe Sestak, a Pennsylvania Democrat and retired three-star admiral, also expressed criticism of the Murtha plan, saying that Congress should not meddle in tactical matters but should concentrate on setting a date for withdrawal of all forces from Iraq.

In the Senate, where at least four Democrats are running for president, each with an Iraq plan, Democratic leaders are pursuing a plan to repeal the war authorization and replace it with language narrowing the military mission. Democrats concede that the plan to revise the authorization, backed by Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), Democrat of Delaware and one of the presidential candidates, is unlikely to garner enough votes to pass, but they hope to pick up enough Republican votes to embarrass Mr. Bush.

Democrats say they are united in their desire to keep the pressure on the president, even as the House and Senate pursue different tactics. Senator [Jim Webb](#), the freshman Democrat from Virginia who was elected on a strong antiwar platform, said Friday in an interview that Democrats agreed that Congress must reassert its authority, even if they had not yet figured out precisely how to do so.

“The true issue here is the federal system,” Mr. Webb said, “the notion of accountability of the executive branch to

Congress for not having conducted itself properly in the diplomatic arena.”

As they search for consensus, Democrats must also worry about a wild card in the debate: Senator [Joseph I. Lieberman](#), the Connecticut Democrat elected as an independent, a strong supporter of the war who has hinted that he might become a Republican if Democrats go too far in trying to rein in Mr. Bush.

With Democrats holding a razor-thin majority in the Senate, a Lieberman defection could put the chamber in Republican hands. That is one reason the Senate Democratic leadership is cool to the Murtha plan, and why Democrats must be careful about pursuing language changing the authorization for the war.

Republicans, sensing an opening, spent Friday trying to exploit Democratic divisions. The Republican Senate leader, [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky, convened a conference call with reporters to taunt Democrats for failing to agree on a means for winding down the war.

At the same time, Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) kept the heat on the speaker of the House, [Nancy Pelosi](#), one day after they engaged in a war of words over Iraq. “She accused me of questioning her patriotism,” he told ABC News, reiterating a charge leveled by Ms. Pelosi on Thursday. “I didn’t question her patriotism. I questioned her judgment.”

Mr. Cheney went on: “The point I made and I’ll make it again is that [Al Qaeda](#) functions on the basis that they think they can break our will. That’s their fundamental underlying strategy, that if they can kill enough Americans or cause enough havoc, create enough chaos in Iraq, then we’ll quit and go home. And my statement was that if we adopt the Pelosi policy, that then we will validate the strategy of Al Qaeda. I said it, and I meant it.”

After an election that was widely viewed as a repudiation of Mr. Bush's policies in Iraq, coupled with the president's announcement that he was sending more troops there rather than moving to bring them home, Democrats have struggled with how to proceed. Last week, in a public rebuke to Mr. Bush, the House passed a resolution disapproving of the troop buildup plan.

But that vote was only a prelude to the coming debate over Mr. Bush's request for \$99.6 billion in emergency financing for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the House, where the emergency spending bill is not scheduled to come to the floor for several weeks, lawmakers are awaiting details of Mr. Murtha's plan. Mr. Cooper, the Tennessee representative, said he opposed any attempt to add conditions to the supplemental appropriations measure, for policy and political reasons. "We should do what we've done with past supplementals: pass it," he said.

In the Senate, the Democratic leader, [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada, is said to be cool to Mr. Murtha's plan. Instead, Mr. Reid has thrown his weight behind Mr. Biden's idea of rewriting the war authorization. Democrats are expected to review it Tuesday at their policy luncheon, their first formal gathering after returning from recess.

During his conference call, Senator McConnell suggested that Republicans might counter with their own plan to force Democrats to vote for or against cutting off financing for the troops entirely. "We have only one option, and that is to decide whether or not to fund the mission," Mr. McConnell said.

But Democrats say they intend to make the debate about the military mission, not the money.

"McConnell presents a false choice," said Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#), Democrat of New York. "The overwhelming

majority disagree with the mission that this fighting has devolved into, which is policing a civil war, and what we're looking at is far more in consonance with what the American people want."