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Bush to Congress: Give new Iraq strategy a chance to work

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WASHINGTON -- President Bush, facing a congressional vote of protest over his escalation of military force in Iraq, confronted a growing challenge to his presidency with complaints Wednesday that members of Congress are pressing for a symbolic vote without allowing his new strategy a chance to restore security inside Iraq.

As an emotional floor debate played out on Capitol Hill, the president cautioned Congress that whatever non-binding resolution is adopted, lawmakers must not jeopardize any of the added money that he is seeking for the support of the war effort--an additional \$100 billion this year for war in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus a further \$145 billion next year.

"People are prejudging the outcome of this," Bush said of a House resolution opposing his deployment of 21,500 additional troops. "My hope, however, is that this non-binding resolution doesn't try to turn into a binding policy that prevents our troops from doing that which I have asked them to do."

Ex-admiral: 'A bad military bet'

On the House floor, in the second day of a marathon debate, Rep. Joe Sestak (D-Pa.), a retired Navy admiral who is sponsor of a binding measure calling for redeployment of most troops by the end of the year, called Iraq a "tragic misadventure."

"My experience says don't double-down on a bad military bet," Sestak said.

The president, confronting the non-binding resolution of the Democratic-led House as a fait accompli, employed the forum of an East Room White House news conference--his first of the year--to lay down his marker before the House vote, expected Friday.

The Senate, meanwhile, is torn over its own vote on a war resolution, offering the president an uncertain moment when yet another plea for patience with the nearly 4-year-old war could buy his newest security strategy some time.

"I find it interesting that there is a declaration about a plan that they have not given a chance to work,"

said Bush, suggesting that members of Congress as well as candidates for the presidency in 2008 can debate it all they want, but "what really is going to matter is what happens, ultimately," in Iraq.

Yet what happens in Washington is of equal concern to the White House, which won congressional authorization for the use of military force in Iraq in 2002 and now is seeking to avert any binding congressional vote that could restrict war funding.

William Howell, a political scientist at the University of Chicago and co-author of a book on congressional limits on presidential war powers, said: "If this latest surge doesn't succeed and the president continues to push the way he is pushing . . . I think it's quite likely that we'll see a real showdown, where there will be discussions about cutting funding, setting caps."

Democrats are maneuvering to attach language to a bill limiting future deployments or perhaps even bringing troops home. Separately, Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) has filed a bill calling for an immediate troop cap and for redeployment of combat forces by spring 2008.

Some insist that any troop cap is unconstitutional.

David Rivkin Jr., a constitutional law expert who served in the Justice Department under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, maintains that the commander in chief holds a unique responsibility and that capping the number of troops that he has deployed is tantamount to "emasculating" the executive branch.

"If you take it to its logical conclusion, a well-crafted appropriations bill with enough conditions can pretty much tell the president what to do from early morning until late night, and there is nothing left for him to exercise any discretion," Rivkin said.

While this week's symbolic debate could be a precursor to a fight over Bush's war spending request, some are warning the House against a retreat. Rep. Jim Saxton (R-N.J.), recalled the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon precipitated by the 1983 suicide bombing of a Marines barrack that left 241 military personnel dead, and the lack of action following the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993 in which 18 U.S. service members were killed.

Still others complain of empty symbolism. Rep. Jim Marshall (D-Ga.), a Vietnam veteran who has long called for drawing down the U.S. military presence in Iraq, said he would not support the resolution because it amounts to sitting out when disagreeing with a coach's calls.

U.S. claim questioned

The president also has asserted that an agency of the Iranian government is supplying weaponry being used against U.S. forces inside Iraq--while brushing aside questions about the quality of intelligence about Iraq's own weaponry that was invoked as cause for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"The idea that somehow we're manufacturing the idea that the Iranians are providing [weapons] is preposterous," he said.

The only question, Bush said, is how much the leaders of the Iranian government know about what is going on.

"I can't say it more plainly," Bush said after repeated questions about the reliability of U.S. intelligence. "There are weapons in Iraq that are harming U.S. troops because of the Quds force. . . .

"Whether [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad ordered the Quds force to do this, I don't think we know," he said, calling it irrelevant.

Bush insisted this will not require direct conflict with Iran.

While the House debates, the troop deployment is under way.

Those troops "will be arriving on time," the president vowed, having just spoken with Gen. David Petraeus, the new American commander in Iraq, who assured him that the new security plan that Bush announced in January is "beginning to take shape."

That plan involves an additional 17,500 U.S. soldiers embedded with Iraqi-commanded units in Baghdad in a bid to gain control over sectarian violence as well as the deployment of 4,000 additional Marines in western Anbar province.

Asked about a recent National Intelligence Estimate reporting that some of the conflicts in Iraq amount to civil war, Bush avoided use of the term.

"It's hard for me, living in this beautiful White House, to give you an assessment, firsthand assessment. I haven't been there," said Bush, who has visited Baghdad's Green Zone, headquarters for U.S. military and the Iraqi government, and the Baghdad airport but has not traveled beyond.

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