

WebMemo



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Memo to Congress on Iraq: Don't Legislate Defeat Again!

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The United States is at a critical juncture in its history. Once again the U.S. Congress appears to be on the verge of deciding whether a war will be won or lost. While true in the long run that the Iraq war could be won or lost in Iraq, it could also be lost on the home front if Congress persists in passing resolutions undercutting or limiting the President's ability to conduct the war.

The U.S. has been here before. The outcome last time around is a sobering history lesson all Members of Congress should consider as they think about where they come down on the Iraq resolutions.

The year was 1974, and a Democratic Congress, upset with the Ford White House for pardoning Richard Nixon, decided that it was time to punish the new administration with all of the power that it had accumulated during the Watergate scandal. Beginning with the Foreign Assistance Act of 1974, after all U.S. troops had left Vietnam, Congress cut off all U.S. funding to the South Vietnamese government—cutting off its ability to buy the weapons it needed to protect itself. It would eventually succumb to the North Vietnamese Army in 1975, setting off a series of Communist victories around the world, as well as the slaughter of millions in neighboring Cambodia.

In retrospect, many historians acknowledge that none of this needed to happen. In the years prior to 1975, the U.S. not only succeeded in bringing the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table to end the war, but South Vietnam remained a free, democratic state, able to defend itself thanks to a steady supply

of U.S. foreign aid and the successful strategy of Vietnamization—not unlike what the U.S. intends to foster in Iraq.

In other words, Vietnam was not solely a casualty of the North Vietnamese, but rather also the victim of political expediency on the part of antiwar Members of Congress. And the same kind of political animosity and fear that seriously impaired the judgment of Congress at the time of the Vietnam War is evident today in the debate over the Iraq resolutions. While not yet at the point where antiwar Members of Congress are cutting funding for the war effort or the Iraq government, the U.S. may very well face that prospect in the near future if the political discourse in this country does not change. Unfortunately, it appears that some senators have yet to learn this important lesson as they begin their journey down the same slippery road that led to U.S. defeat more than 30 years ago.

In the coming weeks, the Senate will consider new, consolidated legislation that bridges resolutions offered by Senator Joe Biden (D-DE), Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator John Warner (R-VA), ranking member of the Armed Services Committee. Though many in the media have already heralded this

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display of bipartisanship, the Senator's cooperation will do nothing to make this bill beneficial to our efforts in Iraq.

Although Congress has the power to pass a resolution to undercut the political, diplomatic, and military authority of the President of the United States (though not his actual constitutional authority to wage war or entreat with foreign nations), the ability to do so does not, in and of itself, validate the action. Whether the Senate passes or does not pass a resolution on Iraq should not be decided based on constitutional considerations, but rather on military and strategic arguments—in other words, on whether it is good for the war effort in Iraq. Reducing the Iraq war debate to parochial concerns about whether a Senator has a right to do or not do something is completely beside the point. Of course, the Senate has a right to take certain action (e.g., defund the war effort) that will inevitably lead to the defeat of U.S. forces in the field and create a setback for America's position in the world. But it should not

hide behind constitutional prerogatives as an excuse for doing so.

The government of South Vietnam did not have to fall. There was nothing preordained in history that this had to happen. Rather, it was in part the result of actions taken by the U.S. Congress, the consequences of which could have been easily predicted. Are Americans going to stand by and watch Congress make the same mistake again—with the same predictable consequences in terms of loss of human life and the enormous political damage done to U.S. credibility and position in the world?

Once was enough. Congress should consider George Santayana's warning that those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. If there ever was a time when this warning should be heeded, it is now.

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