

Arundel Peace Action Commentary

21/02: What It Really Means to “Support the Troops”

The conventional wisdom holds that Democrats in Congress will ultimately cave in their confrontation with President Bush on funding the Iraq occupation. Although Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has proposed cutting off funding if Bush refuses to relent from his uncompromising position, the reality is that too many of Reid’s colleagues as well as the House Democratic leadership are fearful of being branded as “not supporting the troops”.

It does not have to be this way. Democrats should develop a new paradigm of what it means to “support the troops”, one that would offer an alternative to the Republican line that Democratic efforts constitute an abandonment of soldiers in the field. Empowered with this fresh perspective, the Democrats could take bolder action than the meek steps they have put forward so far.

The argument was advanced well in a Doonesbury comic strip on April 1, and it was no April Fools joke. A soldier in Iraq asks his sergeant, “How is cutting off war funds not supporting the troops? Does it mean we’d be stranded here without ammo or rations.” Replies the sergeant, “Of course not. It just means we’d have to withdraw.” The soldier, contemplating the options, observes “So if Congress doesn’t support the troops, I go home to my family. But if they do support us, we have to keep returning to the meat grinder.” Countered the sergeant, “Permission to think it through denied.”

Congress should think it through, because the logic is compelling. Cutting off funds for the occupation is the only action that can help the troops. No one can seriously argue that American’s adventure in Iraq will end the way in which the Bush administration envisioned it. The continued presence of U.S. forces feeds the insurgency. More than 80 percent of Iraqis want the Coalition out of their country. The United States can keep thousands of troops in Iraq for another four years, and the result will be the same: we will be forced to leave and allow the Iraqis to settle their own destiny. The only difference is that more Americans will perish or be gravely injured and a lot more Iraqis will experience the same.

What family wants to have a son or daughter, a husband or wife, a father or mother go to Iraq now? What family who has loved ones there really backs the current policy? The reality is that Americans are finished with Iraq. Although they care about the men and women who have been deployed, as evidenced by the outrage over the scandal at Walter Reed Hospital, they are hardly wedded to the blandishments of the Bush administration of what it means to support them. Opposition to the war and the creeping realization that Bush has no chance to turn around the

situation have reached a point where a majority will find the following argument attractive: The best way to support the troops is to bring them all home in a prompt, orderly fashion and to provide them with the medical, psychological and financial assistance they need to reconstruct their lives.

Democrats should turn Bush's arguments on its head by pointing out that the funds he is seeking are not for the troops. They are for the purpose of continuing the occupation indefinitely. Cutting off the funds, or requiring that any money expended for operations in Iraq go solely for the removal of forces, will not hurt a single GI. It will not leave them without meals, armor or essential services (although the Bush administration has never provided well for these items anyway) because they would no longer be deployed when the money runs out. It will not endanger troops, because the withdrawal will be phased in over many months. A carefully staged withdrawal would send a signal to the ruling Shi'a in Iraq that they must make political accommodations with Sunnis to end the civil strife: a share of the country's oil resources, an equitable number of government positions, and a general amnesty. These steps would offer a better chance of success in stabilizing Iraq than Bush's ill-conceived troop surge.

In the short term, Democrats are apt to be reluctant to try this new strategy because of the narrowness of their margins in Congress and the influence of Blue Dog Democrats. But as support for the war dwindles, as it will, both 2008 presidential candidates and members of Congress should take a look at a new way of framing the debate on how to best "support the troops." Saying that you oppose the war but will continue to vote for funding because of the troops makes no sense. A vote for funding is a vote to continue the occupation. Only when Americans say "enough is enough" loud enough will Congress muster the will to accept this simple logic. The peace movement can advance this process by persuading the public of what it really means to "support the troops".

--Mike Keller