



Forecast for the New Congress: Will the War Come Home?

By David Frum

On the eve of the 2006 midterm elections, American security and the War on Terror hang in the balance. Should Democrats take control of one or both houses of Congress, or should Republicans revert to isolationism, the path of U.S. foreign policy may be redirected toward recrimination, retreat, and inaction.

Washington, November 1974: Voters angered by Watergate, inflation, recession, and gas lines add forty-nine new members to the already large Democratic majority in the House of Representatives and two to the Democratic majority in the Senate.

These “Watergate babies” do more than tilt the partisan balance in Congress. They transform the ideological balance within the Democratic Party. Conservative southern Democrats quickly discover that they must alter their views—or lose their committee chairmanships. Three chairmen refuse to budge and are toppled from power, including the hawkish chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana.

Over the next two years, the new Congress cuts off aid to South Vietnam and Cambodia, precipitating the final defeat of those U.S. allies. It forbids U.S. aid to anticommunist forces in Angola and Mozambique. Members launch crippling investigations into the CIA and other intelligence services, slash defense budgets, and attempt to impose tough new limits on presidential war powers. Between 1975 and 1980, U.S. power and prestige will plunge to depths unvisited since the isolationist 1930s.

Will history repeat itself in 2006?

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In one way, it certainly will not: even if the Democrats were to win almost every seat they hope for, they will probably remain in the minority in the Senate and have only a single digit advantage in the House. The next Congress will not see the huge veto-proof antiwar Democratic majorities of 1975–79. But in other respects, America’s friends and allies abroad had better steel themselves for difficult days ahead.

Subdivided Government

November 7, 2006, will likely be the Democrats’ last night of unity for the next two years. As fiercely as the divisions between Democrats and Republicans now rage, the subdivisions within the Democratic Party will soon rage even fiercer.

The two top Democrats in the House—Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland—openly dislike each other and are locked in conflict over the leadership. In June, Pelosi encouraged Representative John Murtha of Pennsylvania to announce that he would challenge Hoyer for the number two job if Democrats won control of the House. The negative reaction among House Democrats to Murtha’s unusual preelection power play temporarily silenced Murtha and Pelosi. But the internecine tensions

between Pelosi and Hoyer—and between the Democrats who support each of them—remain unassuaged.

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Hoyer voted to authorize the Iraq war; Pelosi against. Hoyer's district is home to the Naval Surface Warfare Center, the Goddard Space Flight Center, and the Patuxent River Naval Station; Pelosi's is home to the gay neighborhoods of the Castro District and the Internet millionaires of Pacific Heights. One out of every six residents of Hoyer's district has served in the military; barely one out of every twenty has done so in Pelosi's.

The Hoyer-Pelosi conflict resonates throughout the Democratic Party. Connecticut Democrats denied their nomination to Senator Joe Lieberman—but Connecticut voters look likely to send him back to the Senate as an independent. Some senior Democrats, like former presidential nominee John Kerry of Massachusetts, have called for a pullout from Iraq within less than twelve months. Others, like New York's Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden of Delaware, have strongly opposed setting any timetable for a U.S. withdrawal.

Left-wing Democrats accuse their more hawkish counterparts of complicity with a president who is disliked and mistrusted by nearly all Democrats. The hawks fear the Left will discredit the whole party as hopelessly soft on defense—and lead everyone to another disaster like that of George McGovern's presidential campaign in 1972.

These factional disputes will only intensify should Democrats win a majority—and as they prepare for the 2008 presidential showdown between the party's two front runners: Al Gore, who opposed the Iraq war from the start, and Hillary Clinton, who voted in favor.

Government by Subpoena

Unable to articulate a foreign policy of their own, Democrats will seek unity by stressing the one thing that animates almost all of them: antagonism to President George W. Bush. The easiest way to express

that antagonism is through investigations of alleged wrongdoing by the administration.

Mindful of the Vietnam experience, Democrats will probably not seek to force the president to withdraw from Iraq. They will instead pressure the president to withdraw on his own initiative: they will present any failure in Iraq as a presidential failure, a self-inflicted catastrophe with no Democratic fingerprints on it. Democrats paid for their political triumphs of 1974–75 with a generation-long image of weakness on national security—and judging by their performance to date, Pelosi and Senate minority leader Harry Reid of Nevada have the insight to recognize past mistakes and the strength and toughness to prevent their party from repeating them.

Instead, they will seek to harry and destroy the administration through the use of Congress's investigative powers. For them, one useful thing about investigations is that the investigators are not required to agree in advance that any wrongdoing actually occurred. Left-wing Democrats convinced that the country was deceived into war by a sinister neoconservative cabal can work alongside more moderate Democrats, who will tell themselves that they are just asking neglected questions. And both factions can then happily go fishing for something damaging to turn up.

For those on the receiving end, a groundless investigation is every bit as time-consuming and excruciating as a meritorious one. And for those on the questioning end, investigations can be nearly equally damaging. They tempt senators and their staffs to see plots rather than problems, to seek revelations rather than solutions, and to think like prosecutors rather than policymakers.

Democrats make no bones about their eagerness to get their hands on the subpoena power. After a May 2006 House caucus meeting, Pelosi spokesman Brendan Daly told reporters that the minority leader had urged Democrats to stop talking of impeaching the president and to fall back instead upon relentless questioning of him:

“We want oversight and checks and balances,” [. . .] Brendan Daly said she told the caucus. “That certainly isn't being done in this Congress. . . .” Even though she said impeachment wouldn't be on the table, Pelosi supports investigations into such issues as prewar intelligence about Iraq and contracts awarded in Iraq to Halliburton Corporation and other companies.¹

There are certainly fair questions to ask about prewar intelligence. But Pelosi's nod to left-of-center conspiracy theories about Halliburton suggests how easy it will be for oversight to pass into the kind of destructive recrimination that did so much damage to the foreign policy of the United States after Vietnam.

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Republican Isolationism Redux

There is much more unhappiness about the Bush foreign policy within the Republican Party in Congress than is generally appreciated. This unhappiness has perhaps been aggravated by the often highhanded attitude of the administration. But the problems extend far beyond courtesies or the absence of them.

Congressional Republicans belong, for the most part, to the party that former House majority leader Dick Arme y calls "pocketbook conservatives." They strongly supported the War on Terror after 9/11. They indulged the Iraq war in 2003 and 2004. But as the war has stalemated and become more costly in lives and money—and as their majority status has come under threat—the grumbling from Congressional Republicans grows louder and louder. It can be heard at every gathering with them. And if they lose in November, they will attribute their loss to the war. Many of them will blame the war's authors and advocates, while others will decide that if forced to choose between their economic program and the president's foreign policy, their economic program will take priority.

Paralysis on Iran

On May 6, 2004, the House of Representatives voted 376 to 3 to authorize the president to "use any and all appropriate means to deter, dissuade and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons." As that lopsided margin suggests, the bill was supported by the great

majority of House Democrats. Did they mean it, or were they voting with both eyes fixed upon the need to demonstrate tough-on-defense credentials in advance of the 2004 election? And even if they were sincere then, do they feel the same way now?

Former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski—remembered as one of the more hawkish members of Jimmy Carter's administration—published an op-ed in April 2006 arguing, "An attack on Iran would be an act of political folly, setting in motion a progressive upheaval in world affairs. With America increasingly the object of widespread hostility, the era of American preponderance could come to a premature end."²

Similar points of view have increasingly been ascendant among Democrats. The Aspen Institute and the New America Foundation have recently convened a group of Democratic-leaning policy intellectuals to devise policy alternatives to military action against Iran. Should it become apparent that the choices on Iran have indeed been reduced to two—acquiescence in nuclearization or military action—more and more Democrats may soon be taking public stands alongside Brzezinski in opposition to the use of force. Will there be enough opponents to deny the president a force resolution in Congress if he should request it? Will it be enough to deter him from asking? Will it be enough—in conjunction with the expected objections from U.S. allies—to deter him from acting or even from credibly threatening to act?

These are among the many uncertainties that will cloud the American security future should November bring the results that the polls of September suggest.

AEI editorial assistant Evan Sparks worked with Mr. Frum to edit and produce this National Security Outlook.

Notes

1. Edward Epstein, "A Democrat-Controlled House Wouldn't Impeach, Pelosi Says," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 13, 2006, available at www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/05/13/MNG94IRGOO1.DTL (accessed September 27, 2006).

2. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Been There, Done That," *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 2006, available at www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-op-brzezinski23apr23,0,3700317.story?coll=la-news-comment-opinions (accessed September 28, 2006).