

Divided Congress capitulates to Bush's personal war in the Gulf

by William Jones and Ronald Kokinda

By a thin majority, criminal insanity prevailed in the 102nd U.S. Congress Jan. 10-12, as it decided to back President George Bush's decision to go to war in order to return a feudal monarchy to power in Kuwait. Despite a mass anti-war movement which is flooding Capitol Hill with constituent pleas against the war, the House and Senate each nonetheless first voted *against* resolutions which would have restricted President Bush to the continued application of economic sanctions against Iraq, and then *for* resolutions giving him the leeway to take the United States to war on Jan. 15 if the Iraqi occupying forces were not pulled out of Kuwait, where they have been since last August. Days later, Bush went to war.

The House first voted down a resolution sponsored by House Majority Leader Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) and Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), which demanded that the policy of sanctions against Iraq be given more time to work. The House then voted 250-183 in support of House Joint Resolution 77 (HJR 77), sponsored by House Minority Leader Rep. Robert Michel (R-Ill.) and Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.), which endorsed the U.N. resolution backing use of military force. Key Democratic committee chairmen, like Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wisc.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, pulled 86 of their fellow Democrats behind Bush. Aspin announced immediately before the vote that he had been convinced by intelligence briefings that the U.S. would not suffer more than 500-1,000 casualties.

The Senate vote was razor-thin. The Senate first defeated a resolution sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Sen. George Mitchell (D-Me.), which called for sanctions and a delay in use of force. It then passed Senate Joint Res. 2, the use of force resolution sponsored by Senate Minority Leader Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.) and Sen. John Warner (R-Va.), which passed 52-47. Ten Democrats voted to support Bush while two Republicans voted against it. A shift of only three votes would have succeeded in stopping the authorization of military force, and provoked a constitutional crisis.

Yet because the vote was close—the Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed 92-2—and as the anti-war sentiment grows with the onset of hostilities, that constitutional crisis, now latent, could erupt at any point.

Zionist lobby wins it for Bush

Pro-war efforts by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) were key in convincing or coercing a sufficient number of legislators to give Bush what he was demanding.

Columnist Robert Novak, speaking on the "Capital Gang" talk show on Jan. 12, said that the President's victory was the fact that "AIPAC has become the best friend of the Republican Party. . . . I spoke to many Republicans who told me that they just hated voting for this resolution, but felt that they had to do it in order to support the President." Columnist Patrick Buchanan claimed that the line presented to congressmen was that if Bush did not get the vote, and felt that his presidency were in the balance, he was prepared to go to war immediately, perhaps before the vote even occurred. In short, these columnists are saying that AIPAC, brinkmanship, and blackmail produced Bush's "victory."

But the closeness of both the Senate and House votes indicated that the Establishment was split on the war question. While many hard-core members of the Zionist lobby backed war, including so-called liberals like HJR 77 sponsors Reps. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.), Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), Howard Berman (D-Calif.), and Mel Levine (D-Calif.), a number of Zionist lobby types, such as Reps. Sid Yates (D-Ill.), Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), and Ed Feighan (D-Ohio), opposed it.

Americans will die unnecessarily

The atmosphere was unlike any in recent memory. Although many legislators denied the real nature of the vote, most of them were intensely aware that the issue was war. Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) remarked, "There is a grim mood here in Congress such as I do not recall." For many, the vote represented a genuine moral conflict; the memory of the carnage caused by the Vietnam war was still fresh.

Senator Mitchell set the tone in his opening remarks. Urging the senators to "vote their conscience," Mitchell asked, "How many people will die? How many young Americans will die? And for the families of those young Americans who die, for every one of us, the truly haunting question will be, did they die unnecessarily?"

Members would relate personal experiences about the

returning bodybags from Vietnam or from the bombing of the Marines in Beirut. "War is not a simple righting of wrongs," said Rep. Mary Rose Oaker (D-Ohio). "It is about tears and pain. It is about lost arms and legs. It is about paralyzed bodies lying inert in already overwhelmed veterans hospitals. It is about shattered dreams and shattered families and children losing their mothers and fathers. It is about sending America's children to kill and be killed."

Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, compared the Congress's situation with Bush to the time when the Romans delivered an ultimatum to the Council of Carthage in 218 B.C. "Fabius Buteo [the head of the Roman delegation] said that within the fold of his toga he held both war and peace," said Byrd, "and asked the Carthaginian council, 'Which do you choose?' The council answered, 'It is your choice.' Fabius then, with a symbolic gesture, said, 'Then I will let fall war.' And the Carthaginian council shouted, 'We accept it.'"

Many of those supporting the authorization of military force claimed that they were really voting for peace. "In short, Mr. President," claimed Sen. Larry Pressler (R-S.D.), "we are not today deciding on a resolution to go to war. This is not a declaration of war resolution. We are deciding whether to adopt a resolution that would strengthen the chances for a peaceful resolution of the crisis." Pressler argued that a strong show of congressional support for military force would convince Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait.

Bonapartist rule

A number of legislators, however, didn't bother to give lip-service to such transparent arguments, and acknowledged openly that they were voting for war in the face of overwhelming opposition from their constituents. Up to the last minute, Democrats like Sens. Albert Gore (D-Tenn.) and Phil Graham (D-Fla.) had not made up their minds how they would vote; both eventually voted for war. Gore, who claimed to have made an "excruciating effort" to come to his decision, admitted that, disbelieving the national polls, he had commissioned his own poll in Tennessee and found that sentiment was running 7-3 against war. Yet, Gore ignored them. He had little doubt about what he was supporting: "I believe it is wishful thinking to vote for the Warner amendment on the assumption that it leads to peace. This debate is no longer about the threat of war and the hope of peace . . . this debate is about war. We should have no illusions."

Another Democrat who backed war, Sen. Charles Robb (Va.), ignored constituents. One delegation of a dozen constituents visited Robb's office and were told he was not there, only to see someone ushered into a meeting with the Senator.

Daily anti-war demonstrations were held in Washington and in scores of cities around the U.S. during the week leading up to the vote. Fifteen thousand turned out in Portland, Oregon; 10,000 in Seattle, Washington; thousands in Boston, San Francisco, and elsewhere. Small towns like Mercer,

Pennsylvania, which had never seen demonstrations during the Vietnam War, saw 100 turn out.

One dramatic effect of constituency pressure was the switch by freshman Rep. James Moran (D-Va.). After saying he was leaning toward support for Bush, Moran called a town meeting during the debate to which 300-400 people showed up. He said anti-war sentiment was so "overwhelming" that he had to re-think his position; he later voted against war. "I have seen stacked meetings before, and know one when I see it, and this was not a stacked meeting," Moran admitted. "This was an undeniable expression of the opinions of my constituents."

Bush's commie-pinko 'New World Order'

Liberal Rep. Ron Dellums (D-Calif.) referred to the dangerous infantile nature of the President's behavior. "At the top of the mountain the President of the United States says: 'Kick butt,' because kicking butt is the way to solve problems; so we communicate to an entire generation of young people that it is not about sitting down to attempt to solve problems in some rational and mature fashion. No, it is about kicking butt." Dellums pointed out the real nature of the Gulf operations, as a model for NATO out-of-area deployments against countries of the developing sector. "What is this new world order?" asked Dellums. "The President uses this comment. I find it fascinating. Several years ago people thought there was a commie-pinko-left-wing radical idea, the new world order. But it is being embraced by a conservative Republican President. . . . Does it mean going from threatening strategic war to threatening sophisticated conventional war? Does it go from focusing on the major superpowers to focusing on Third World countries?"

Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.), one of the two Republicans in the Senate who opposed war and sanctions, said, "If we want to avoid war, then we ought to say so. Right here and right now. And instead of playing this dangerous game of 'maybe now, maybe later,' it is my view that we ought to bring our troops home once and for all."

Upheaval foreshadowed in U.S.

Warnings of the long-term consequences of a Gulf war were repeated by many congressmen, foreshadowing the coming political upheaval in the U.S. The first day's debate was interrupted by demonstrators in the Senate gallery chanting "No blood for oil!" and "Stop the war now!" Eleven people were arrested. Sen. Donald Riegle (D-Mich.), who argued eloquently against putting Americans between Iraq and the royal family of Kuwait, said he did not agree with the demonstrators' tactics, but warned that if war starts, such actions, like those that tore the nation apart during the Vietnam War, would become common.

"The harm we will do will haunt us for many, many years to come," said Rep. Chet Atkins (D-Mass.). "The destruction, the bitterness, and the confusion will linger long after our planes fly home and the cost will be enormous far into the future."