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Putting It in Perspective

## Debate Over Iraq Brings Honeymoon to an Unpleasant End

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By **David Winston**  
Roll Call Contributing Writer

March 20, 2007

The honeymoon is officially over. Like a pair of newlyweds back from a week on a warm Caribbean beach, Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) suddenly have run head-on into the cold, harsh reality of wartime politics. They may have a majority, but the party's marriage of anti-war liberals and centrists seems shaky and sorely lacking in cohesion as Congressional Democrats struggle to find an Iraq War policy on which they can agree.



David Winston

Shrewdly, the Democrats kicked off their newly won control with their "100 Hours" agenda, kind of a "Contract with America"-lite, designed to score some quick public relations points with voters without the heavy lifting. Now, the first phase of their takeover is all but over, and the new majority's track record clearly has failed to impress the public.

In two media polls taken in early March by CBS News/New York Times and NBC/Wall Street Journal, Congressional job approval remained at a low ebb with a 31 percent approval rating and 53 percent disapproval. It's worth noting that the Democrats' low marks don't differ from Republicans' job approval of only a year ago when voters in these same polls gave Congress approval/disapproval ratings of 32 percent/54 percent and 33 percent/53 percent, respectively, just eight months before sending the GOP majority packing.

It's not surprising the Democratic numbers haven't improved. Little progress has been made toward enacting substantive legislation that addresses either a new direction for the war, which their base wants, or the myriad domestic problems that mainstream voters elected them to



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solve.

Whether it is minimum wage, energy independence or health care, Democrats haven't gotten the job done and have failed to meet voters' high expectations for change. However, it has been their utter inability to craft a unified majority position on Iraq that has slowed the Democrats' momentum and damaged the perception of their party as better able to get things accomplished. Instead, voters see the increasingly militant anti-war forces in the House, led by Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), taking positions closer to extreme organizations such as MoveOn.org and Code Pink than their own leadership.

In the Senate, it's been no better. Last week, Reid lost a key leadership vote on a defining amendment that would have brought the troops home by March 2008, managing to round up only 48 votes. Meanwhile, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) backtracked once again on the war issue Wednesday by telling The New York Times that, as president, she would leave a substantial number of troops in Iraq.

Frustrated by their own leadership's failure to end the war sooner rather than later, far left demonstrators have begun protesting Democratic Congressional offices, from Pelosi and House Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel (Ill.) to Sens. Barbara Mikulski (Md.) and Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (Ill.).

Wisconsin Rep. David Obey (D) had the dubious distinction of being "YouTubed" when protesters, one the mother of a Marine veteran of the Iraq War, confronted the powerful Appropriations chairman outside his office.

A clearly angry Obey was captured on video raging at the protesters as he referred to "idiot liberals" who he said just didn't understand that "we don't have the votes" to stop the war. Finally, he slammed the door in the woman's face and set off a firestorm of negative coverage for himself and his party.

The seeming intractability of Democratic divisions on the war coupled with their inability to get things done threatens their carefully crafted makeover in to the can-do party for change. The last thing leaders want now is the media focusing on the growing split within their ranks over the war, and, apparently, they've come up with a solution — at least to their problem.

The recent rush of Congressional charges and investigations, pushed by partisans such as Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), haven't happened by accident. In the name of oversight, Democrats have begun using the investigatory powers of the Congress to get a political "three-fer."

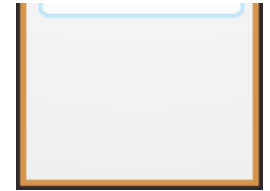
First, they get the spotlight off their political problems and keep the public's attention focused on something other than their lack of a unified position on the war and their paper-thin record of getting things done. Highly charged hearings let them put the blame back on President Bush.

Thus, we have seen former CIA operative Valerie Plame Wilson put on a bravura performance for the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, getting page one coverage and a starring role on the network news.

Second, Democrats want to get even. For the past six years, they loudly have complained that the Bush administration ignored them and their input in the policy process. Now that they're running the show, it's time for payback.

Finally, a few highly charged hearings give Democrats the opportunity to give their anti-war base some partisan red meat to chew on in lieu of strong action. So this week subpoenas will be flying once again as Democratic leaders demand the appearance on Capitol Hill of a raft of top White House and Justice Department staff to testify about the firing of U.S. attorneys.

Ultimately, the American people reward those who get things done. What Democrats don't understand is that it's not about defining your opponent. Politically motivated investigations won't push job approval numbers higher; action that solves people's problems will. So will



keeping promises.

**David Winston is president of The Winston Group, a Republican polling firm.**

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