

February 7, 2008 - Murtha: Iraq Bill to Come up in March

The Hill

www.thehill.com

Murtha: Iraq bill to come up in March

By Roxana Tiron

February 7, 2008

A leading House Democrat wants to reignite the debate over the withdrawal of troops from Iraq in March, a move that represents a marked change after Democratic leaders in both chambers toned down their rhetoric in recent months.

Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), the chairman of the Appropriations Defense Subcommittee and a leading critic of the Iraq war, said that his panel would likely be done considering the second installment of the 2008 war supplemental by the end of February. "After that I will try to convince the leadership to bring it up in March," he told reporters Thursday, after he spoke at the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He said he would make the same recommendations as he did last year: setting a goal date for troop withdrawals and mandating standards for troop readiness.

Murtha added that introducing troop withdrawal language is a leadership decision. House leadership is still under pressure from the liberal base to force a change in Iraq policy.

"People have been to my office every day saying, 'You have not gotten out of Iraq yet,'" Murtha said.

"I think [legislation] will pass the House; whether it will pass the Senate I do not know," Murtha added. So far, Senate Republicans have repeatedly blocked Democratic attempts to get the 60 votes necessary to pass their Iraq legislation.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Robert Gates has been urging Congress to pass the remaining \$102 billion in the 2008 supplemental request as soon as possible. Money would run out by June or, at the latest, July. Murtha said that he does not want to wait until the summer to consider the supplemental.

"They need planning time," he said. "[A] supplemental is not the way to do it, but let's give it to them early enough so that they don't have to screw around like they did last year."

The Pentagon and the White House have been under fire in Congress for not submitting an entire estimate for the war costs in fiscal year 2009. When the Pentagon submitted its 2009 budget request, it included only \$70 billion as a "bridge fund" for the war.

When pressed at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Wednesday, Gates reluctantly said that the war may cost \$170 billion for fiscal 2009, but added that the number will be wrong. Murtha said he expects to see at least \$200 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan next year.

Gen. David Petraeus, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, is expected to make new recommendations to Iraq strategy in April. That could also influence the money request for 2009.

“What I told Gen. Petraeus is [that] you can’t continue to spend money like he is spending over there, and the public is fed up with it,” Murtha said.

Murtha added that the cost of the war in Iraq is to blame for the other economic problems at home, including the threat of a recession.

“Our national debt has ballooned by \$2.77 trillion since the beginning of the war in Iraq, increasing by nearly \$1 million per minute,” Murtha said in his CSIS presentation. “This administration borrows \$343 million every day to finance the war in Iraq and continues to shortchange our domestic needs.”

The Appropriations Defense panel chairman said that the defense budget is inevitably going to be reduced “no matter who is elected” in November.

Defense spending has seen a record growth in the last six years. The \$515.4 billion defense budget for 2009 represents a 74 percent increase from the 2001 budget, according to the White House.

Meanwhile, Murtha said that he is listening to the Air Force’s case for more Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor fighter jets, which are meant to replace the Cold War-era F-15 fighters.

“They have to prove to us that there is a threat and there are that many needed and they are in the process of doing that now,” he said. “I would like to buy enough to get the price down, and whether we will be able to do that I do not know.”

He said he is consider the remaining 2008 supplemental, the 2009 supplemental and the regular defense budget as vehicles to buy more F-22s.

He is also planning to add 14 Boeing C-17 cargo aircraft to the 2008 supplemental, as well as more Lockheed C-130Js, the number of which is not yet clear.

“We are going to buy enough 130s to reduce the price by \$10 million a copy,” he said.

Murtha also criticized the Navy’s shipbuilding budget request of seven ships and said that he is ready to add money for three more ships next year.