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Progress in Iraq reshapes debate over war

By Ken Dilanian, USA TODAY

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WASHINGTON — When President Bush proposed increasing U.S. troop levels to quell rising violence in Iraq more than a year ago, several Republicans in Congress were skeptical.

Democrats almost uniformly predicted failure.

"I don't think it will change a thing," Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., then the incoming chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said in December 2006.

"It would create more targets," added Republican Sen. Norm Coleman of Minnesota.

"This surge is a bad idea," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said a few weeks later. The criticism grew louder last April, when Reid declared the war "lost," and louder still over the summer, as U.S. casualties mounted.

In September, the situation in Iraq began to improve. In October, the number of U.S. troops there peaked at 171,000 — 35,000 more than the previous January. By December 2007, U.S. deaths were at their lowest levels since the 2003 invasion, civilian casualties were down, and street life was resuming in Baghdad.

The impact on American politics has been nearly as striking. As the U.S. effort has shown more success, the slowing economy has eclipsed the war as voters' No. 1 concern, according to a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll conducted Jan. 4-6.

The progress has boosted the presidential campaign of Republican John McCain, an early advocate of the troop increase. And while Democratic hopefuls Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton continue to call for pulling combat troops out of Iraq, the success of the new military strategy has helped stymie efforts by Democrats in Congress to change Bush's policy.

Even as the Iraq war promises to be a defining issue of the fall presidential campaign, the debate on Capitol Hill has lost steam. Most congressional Democrats have been walking a rhetorical tightrope, praising the reduction in violence while contending it hasn't improved Iraq's long-term outlook.

Unlike a year ago, they have shown little interest in trying to force Bush to rapidly withdraw troops — or at least make him veto their timeline for doing so.

After Bush requested \$70 billion in war funding earlier this month, Rep. John Murtha of Pennsylvania, who heads the defense appropriations subcommittee, was virtually alone among Democratic leaders in vowing to push for troop withdrawal language in spending bills.

During a recent planning meeting, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland urged fellow Democrats not to link withdrawal with spending bills.

Democrats actually have lost ground since the summer, as wavering moderate Republicans have embraced the troop strategy. Rep. Wayne Gilchrist of Maryland, a Republican who voted to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq, was defeated in last week's primary by a supporter of the current policy.

"Petraeus was right," Coleman said of Gen. David Petraeus, the architect of the new military strategy. "I had concerns, and he proved me wrong. The surge has really changed the dynamic."

The recent news that Petraeus and Defense Secretary Robert Gates are leaning toward a brief pause in planned withdrawals of U.S. combat brigades drew protests from Democrats, but they say there isn't much they can do.

"We don't have a two-thirds majority to override the president's veto," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Feb. 10 on CNN. "We don't have 60 votes in the Senate to allow our (troop withdrawal) legislation to go forward."

For now, congressional Democrats are focusing on legislation to improve military readiness and require congressional approval of a U.S.-Iraqi agreement over U.S. military bases.

It's not that the Iraq war has become more popular. In a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll conducted Feb. 8-10, 60% of Americans said the war was a mistake, a number echoed in other surveys over the past year. But the poll also found that 43% think the troop increase is "making the situation there better" — up from 22% in July.

"There's an old political saying," says Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., a House Armed Services Committee member. "If you're gonna have to eat crow, you might as well eat it hot."

Focus on Iraq fades on the Hill

During the spring and summer, when car bombs were a near-daily occurrence in Baghdad and U.S. troop deaths spiked, hardly a day went by when Democrats in Congress didn't try to focus attention on Iraq through hearings, news conferences and floor debates.

Those occasions are now few and far between. When Gates appeared before the House Armed Services Committee on

Feb. 6 to discuss war funding, Skelton didn't mention Iraq until the 12th paragraph of his opening statement, and he didn't refer to conditions on the ground.

Even the most ardent Iraq war opponents in Congress, such as Democratic Reps Barbara Lee and Lynn Woolsey, both of California, emphasized the issue of permanent U.S. bases in Iraq, not troop withdrawals, in a recent letter to Pelosi about Iraq. They continue to support legislation to block funding for the war, but they say they know it isn't going anywhere.

When Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker came before Congress in September, the slide in violence had barely begun. Clinton, for one, said their report of budding success required "a willing suspension of disbelief."

The two men are scheduled to return to the Hill in April. Crocker may be hard-pressed to argue that Iraqis have met political benchmarks Congress sought, but in recent days the Iraqi parliament passed a budget, a provincial governance law and an amnesty law that Adnan al-Dulaimi, a Sunni lawmaker, called "the greatest achievement possible for the Iraqi people."

Petraeus, however, will be able to tick off a list of undisputed military achievements.

"I don't have any reason to doubt there has been military success," says Rep. Vic Snyder, D-Ark., an Armed Services Committee member and Vietnam veteran.

Several factors are driving the progress in Iraq.

Besides the additional troops, Petraeus imposed new counterinsurgency tactics. U.S. forces began paying Sunni militias to turn against al-Qaeda. Americans are living in small neighborhood encampments, closer to the populace, so that cleared areas remain insurgent-free. A cease-fire by Shiite militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr also has helped.

The result, military analysts told Congress last month, is that although Iraq remains fractured, the United States is better positioned to draw down combat forces while avoiding civil war than if Democrats had gotten their way and forced a substantial troop withdrawal over the past year.

"I think that the underlying strategic calculus in Iraq has changed since 2006 in ways that create an opportunity … for something that looks like tolerable stability," Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations told a House panel last month.

Andrew Krepinevich of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments added: "Our best chance at achieving our minimal objectives lies in building upon the success that has come out of the surge rather than pulling the plug on what we're doing in Iraq and hoping for the best."

Weighing progress vs. success

Some analysts disagree, including Lawrence Korb, a senior fellow at the Democrat-leaning Center for American Progress. He argues that most U.S. troops should be withdrawn as soon as possible.

Others caution that the situation could easily worsen, despite the new American strategy. "This could just be a feel-good period (before Iraq) plunges back into despair," Cooper says.

The raw numbers, though, are stark: There were 40 U.S. deaths in January, down from 126 in May, according to the Defense Department. The civilian death toll in December 2007 was half what it was in January 2007, according to Iraq Body Count, a website that compiles media reports of Iraqi deaths.

"I'm not critical of those who were skeptical of the surge last January," said Michael O'Hanlon, a Democratic scholar at the Brookings Institution. "I'm more critical of an attitude now that says, 'I'm not going to look back and learn why things are different than what I expected, or acknowledge that significant progress has been made.' "

A few lawmakers have done that, including Rep. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind. He returned from Iraq in December to tell reporters: "I feel we've made progress, and the other part is I feel we can see an endgame in sight."

He offered a much different view five months before his trip, when he said on the House floor: "I fear this surge will not lead to an Iraq that will be stable over the long term, but will instead put more … American troops into harm's way."

Such turnabouts are rare.

Most Democrats give credit to the increase in troops but say they were right to oppose it. "The question's usually posed, 'Well, has the surge worked?' " Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., told reporters last month after returning from his 11th trip to Iraq. "Well, it's worked much in the way a tourniquet has worked: It stopped the bleeding. It has reduced the level of violence, and that is a notable achievement."

A year ago, Reed, a former Army paratrooper, spoke against sending more troops to Iraq, saying, "It's going to be a little too little and probably too late."

Asked recently whether he and other Democrats were wrong to oppose the rise in troops, he said, "No. … The surge was not simply (about) reducing the level of violence. It was getting the Iraqi political process to make permanent political decisions. That hasn't happened."

Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid have taken similar stances, acknowledging that U.S. troops — as opposed to the Bush administration — have made progress, while calling the policy a failure overall.

Last week, asked whether she was wrong to oppose the surge, Pelosi replied: "God knows, anytime our military men and women go into a military exercise, we want them to succeed, and they did. The politics did not follow. So they can paint whatever picture they want on it; the goal has not been accomplished. The tragedies, the casualties continue. We are going in the wrong direction in Iraq."

Political damage control

Both leading Democratic presidential candidates opposed sending more troops to Iraq last year.

Now, Obama's website says: "At great cost, our troops have helped reduce violence in some areas of Iraq, but even those reductions do not get us below the unsustainable levels of violence of mid-2006. Moreover, Iraq's political leaders have made no progress in resolving the political differences at the heart of their civil war."

On Fox News Sunday this month, Chris Wallace asked Clinton: "Senator, you started calling for pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq in November of 2005. If we had followed your policy, wouldn't al-Qaeda by now be able to say that they had driven the U.S. out of Iraq?"

Clinton — who voted to authorize the war, while Obama spoke against it as a state senator in Illinois — said "the so-called surge was designed to give the Iraqi government the space and time to make the tough decisions that only the Iraqis can make for themselves. … And I think that putting forward a very clear objective of beginning to withdraw our troops is the best way to get the Iraqis to take responsibility."

Republican presidential front-runner McCain, meanwhile, expresses vindication over the latest turn of events in Iraq. "Many, many experts said that the surge would not succeed and said that I was wrong," he said last month on Meet the Press.

"And, my friend, I was right."