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By Ryan Grim

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With Army Gen. David Petraeus set to return to Washington next week, congressional Democrats are rethinking their so far unsuccessful strategy of pushing for a timeline for troop withdrawals. Instead, party leaders may opt to focus on politically safer diplomatic alternatives and "troop-friendly" initiatives such as improved education benefits and more time for training and time at home between overseas tours.

Iraq policy remains a point of friction within the party. The Democrats' ultimate direction on the war remains an open question that will be decided by some familiar voices in Congress — and some hoping to get there.

A new factor in the Democratic debate is a plan supported by congressional challengers that would set a date for withdrawal but would rely on military advice for the pace and timing.

On the Hill, some form of troop withdrawal remains on the table, and a major force in shaping the next funding bill for the war will be Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.), who is slated to meet Wednesday with members of his House Appropriations defense subcommittee. Murtha said Tuesday that, while a final decision is up to the party leadership, he is prepared to again recommend that the war funding bill set a goal for withdrawing U.S. troops, albeit with a longer timeline than the 12-month schedule proposed last fall.

Delaware Democratic Sen. Joe Biden's Foreign Relations Committee will host Petraeus and Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker next week as part of a six-hearing offensive to highlight the war. Biden says his focus will be President Bush's "definition of success" in Iraq. "Let's measure the surge based on [the administration's] own terms," Biden said. An aide to Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said that she would meet with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) Tuesday night, to discuss the plan for appropriating funds.

As congressional Democrats plot strategy for next week's Petraeus-Crocker appearances, a growing number of Democratic congressional challengers are coming together around something called the "Responsible Plan to End the War in Iraq."

The plan's author, Washington House candidate Darcy Burner, said that her original goal had been to have 50 candidates sign on to the plan by September. Just 2½ weeks into its life, the plan has nearly that many, picking up six more in the past few days to bring to the total to 48.

The Nation, a major voice of the left, ran an editorial in favor of the plan late last week, despite its lack of a specific timeline for withdrawal. It has been popular in the liberal blogosphere, aggressively backed by OpenLeft.com's Matt Stoller, among others.

The plan is an organic byproduct of the political stalemate in Washington state over the war, according to its backers. Burner said voters "have been presented with this false choice: to either stay the course ... or complete chaos, the end of the world as we know it, terrorist attacks on our shores and the destruction of the American way of life. They get that there must be a third choice."

Interviews with more than a half-dozen Democratic House challengers who have endorsed the plan yield a similar response: They say that voters' concern is no longer whether the U.S. should leave Iraq, but how to do so. Polls show that opposition to the war has been stable over the past year, despite security gains. A CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll done in the middle of March found that 66 percent of respondents opposed the war, roughly the same as a year earlier.

Supporters of the plan are running in red and swing districts from suburban Seattle to Montana to the Ohio rustbelt to rural New York and Virginia. The Responsible Plan draws heavily from the Baker-Hamilton Commission's report and from 17 bills that have been introduced in Congress; it would set a date to begin withdrawal, though it would rely on military advice for the pace of that redeployment. The plan's broad reach promotes clean energy, a restoration of habeas corpus, a ban on torture and rendition, opposition to media consolidation, State Department reorganization, veterans care and a new GI Bill.

Opponents aren't impressed.

"Their so-called 'plan' to precipitously withdraw from the region sounds an awful lot like repackaged talking points from MoveOn.org," said Ken Spain of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

"It seems like the same sort of, 'We need more diplomacy,' the same sort of crap," said another GOP source. "It's the thinnest possible political cover for a strategy of irresponsible, precipitous withdrawal."

At a Cabinet meeting in February 2007 — just as the "surge" began — the president said its purpose was "to provide enough space so that the Iraqi government can meet certain benchmarks or certain requirements for a unity government to survive and for the country to be strong. The success of that plan is going to depend upon the capacity and willingness of the Iraqis to do hard work, and we want to help them do that work."

Judged against that standard, Biden said the surge has failed. "I don't think the situation on the ground [come election time] will be one that lets the American people believe that there is a way out without chaos," he said.

"It's this fear of chaos the plan hopes to address. Tom Perriello, a Democrat running in central Virginia with more than a half-million dollars in cash on hand, said that the "Responsible Plan" responds to a "deep inkling that a full-on, immediate withdrawal would be equally disastrous." Perriello said that people he speaks to want to leave Iraq, but they want to feel like they're doing it in the most moral and responsible way. "The second you put [the Responsible Plan] on the table, people are hungry to support it."

House Republicans have already launched an aggressive messaging campaign aimed at putting the Democrats on the defensive on Iraq; they believe that the president's "surge" has worked and argue that the Democrats can't take success for an answer.

Democratic House leaders, on the other hand, are already focusing on the costs of the war, drawing a line between the money that's going to Iraq and the economic troubles facing Americans back home. Earlier this week, the speaker's office sent out a bunch of news reports to Capitol Hill media, all focused on the war's cost in human, dollar and opportunity terms.

Murtha was reluctant to discuss details of the next funding bill before meeting with colleagues. But he indicated that the bill would again include anti-torture language as well as provisions to ensure that units sent to Iraq are fully ready for combat and are given adequate time at home between deployments.

A Marine veteran of Vietnam, Murtha said he recognized that the leadership will have the final word, but he saw no reason to back away from at least setting a goal for withdrawals. "I see it as giving the Iraqis an incentive," he said. "This is bleeding us. We have to do what's in the best interests of the United States, not Iraq, and the people back home want us out. At some point, the Republicans have to decide if they are going down with the Bush ship or not."

David Rogers contributed to this story.