

Senate Passes Broad War Funding Measure

Democrats' Domestic Spending Intact

By Paul Kane
Washington Post Staff Writer
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In a 92 to 6 vote, the Senate yesterday approved unrestricted funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that allows continuation of the current military course of action through the end of President Bush's term and beyond.

In exchange for that unencumbered freedom to operate in Iraq, Bush agreed to demands by congressional Democrats to create a new higher-education benefit for veterans and their families, and to extend unemployment benefits.

"There are going to be a lot of veterans in the United States who are going to be happy with the United States Senate," said Sen. James Webb (D-Va.), who crafted the legislation granting the new education benefit.

In the end, the \$257.5 billion emergency spending bill, which had been the subject of two months of intense debate and negotiation, won overwhelming support in the Senate and the House, where it was approved last Friday by 416 to 12.

Bush is expected to sign the bill next week.

Since House passage last week, the outcome of Bush's last war funding fight with the Democratic-controlled Congress had been a foregone conclusion. But the bill became entangled in unrelated disputes that created a logjam in the Senate, as conservatives opposed a housing bill and liberal Democrats opposed a rewriting of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

Unable to overcome parliamentary hurdles, Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) postponed consideration of both until Congress returns from its week-long Fourth of July recess. In addition, the Senate failed to clear a 60-vote threshold on a bill to postpone a 10.6 percent fee cut for doctors who treat Medicare patients. That reduction will take effect next week.

By setting aside those issues, the Senate cleared a path for the war funding measure, which ended up with enough legislative morsels to please just about every philosophical corner of Congress.

Bush began the fight in early May by demanding a "clean" war funding bill that would provide the \$108 billion he needed for Iraq and Afghanistan with no restrictions on how he could conduct the war and with no additional domestic spending favored by Democrats.

Having lost every attempt in the previous year to limit Bush's hand in Iraq, Democrats quickly gave up their effort to force a timeline for troop withdrawals and focused their efforts on a domestic agenda.

That included the education benefit, which gives veterans who have served since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks the ability to pay tuition at even the most expensive state universities. Democrats also included the unemployment extension for jobless workers who already have used their 26 weeks of insurance. It will cost taxpayers more than \$8 billion.

Democrats inflated the war funds to about \$162 billion. The additional money will keep military operations going well into 2009.

After initially fighting the education and unemployment provisions, Bush capitulated and demanded that the education benefit be transferable to spouses and children of veterans. That pushed the cost of the Webb bill to \$62.8 billion over 11 years.

The legislation also contains a \$24 billion grab bag of other items, including \$5.8 billion to strengthen levees in Louisiana and \$4.6 billion to rebuild veterans hospitals.

The additions brought the total cost of the bill to almost \$150 billion more than Bush's original request.

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