

Berman with GOP on Iraq **Congressman breaks ranks to reject troop timetable**

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WASHINGTON - Capping two days of rancorous partisan debate, Rep. Howard Berman, D-Van Nuys, broke with most of his party Friday and voted to approve a Republican-backed resolution to reject a timetable for U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq.

Berman was the only Southland Democrat to break ranks and the only local lawmaker of either party to do so. Just 42 Democrats voted in favor of the nonbinding resolution, which passed 256-153 and marked the first broad House debate on the war.

"I voted for today's resolution on Iraq because I agree with what it calls for: success in the `mission to create a sovereign, free and united Iraq.' I still have hope that we can accomplish that mission," Berman said in a statement.

Democrats, led by Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, denounced the measure as a political ploy designed to boost President George W. Bush's sagging poll ratings and paint anyone with criticisms of the Iraq war as a coward eager to "cut and run."

Berman on Friday agreed with those criticisms, but said the importance of U.S. success in Iraq "transcends the cheap and tawdry tactics of the Republican leadership."

The 12-term lawmaker representing a secure Democrat seat in the San Fernando Valley voted in favor of authorizing the use of force in Iraq in 2002. Defending his position this year during the primaries, he admitted that he would not have cast that vote had he known that no weapons of mass destruction existed.

But, he argued, now that the U.S. is committed, withdrawing troops would be "calamitous."

Southern California political analysts said they were not surprised by Berman's vote Friday, calling it largely consistent with his convictions.

"I have watched Howard a very long time, and I've seen him agonize over issues of foreign policy. He has become, over the years, more centrist and less reliably liberal on these issues," said University of Southern California political scientist Sherry Bebitch Jeffe.

Berman's vote might have had an impact on his re-election if it occurred before the June 6 primary. His Democratic challenger, Charles Coleman Jr., had called for immediate troop withdrawal and the impeachment of Bush.

But Jeffe noted that California's incumbent-safe districts have ensured that his backing of the resolution will have little influence come November.

Berman received 80 percent of the vote in the primary while Coleman took 19 percent. His Republican opponent in the November election, Stanley Kimmel Kesselman, did not return a call Friday.

Meanwhile, Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Sherman Oaks, opted not to take a position at all, simply voting "present" Friday.

He was one of five lawmakers to do so.

Sherman, who voted in favor of authorizing the use of force in 2002, has not called for withdrawal. But he said the U.S. should not stay in Iraq to the distraction of other international crises.

He attacked the resolution as a "mishmash" of "paragraphs that make a lot of sense and paragraphs that don't," and criticized it for, among other things, overstating Saddam Hussein's threat to world peace.

"I didn't think that a 'yes' vote or a 'no' vote would tell people where I stood, so I voted 'present,'" Sherman said.

Sherman's Republican challenger, Peter Hankwitz, attributed the congressman's "present" vote to the upcoming elections.

"'Present' is sitting on the fence. 'Present' is showing up but refusing to take a stand on an issue," Hankwitz said, adding that he would have voted in favor of the resolution.

"Mr. Sherman is trying to tout himself right now as an expert on Iran - but if he's not going to stand firmly to support America's troops, then he's not much of an expert on anything," he said.

Other Southern California Democrats who supported the war before maintaining they were lied to about the existence of weapons of mass destruction used their opposition to the resolution to further distance themselves from the current violence and turmoil in Iraq.

"Our action in Iraq created a failed state," Rep. Jane Harman, D-El Segundo, leading Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said on the House floor.

"I believe the U.S. is part of the solution in Iraq, but our large military presence is part of the problem," she said. "This resolution, in my view, is a press release for staying the course in Iraq. It does not signal a change in policy, and thus I cannot support it."

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, called the bill "a rhetorical pompom."

Decrying the lives lost and billions of dollars spent, Schiff said, "We need a new way forward in Iraq, a fact that seems glaringly obvious to everybody but the president, his advisers and the majority (party) in this House."

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, denounced waste and fraud in the Iraq contracting process and accused Republicans of abdicating their oversight responsibilities. His spokeswoman said he missed the vote because he had a flight scheduled back to California, but would have opposed the resolution.

The floor battle was the first full debate of military operations in Iraq since the October 2002 vote to authorize the use of force.

Capitalizing on the momentum of the recent killing of al-Qaida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the formation of an Iraqi Cabinet, Republicans painted the debate as a choice between GOP resolve and Democratic fickleness and flight.

"Just 12 days ago, I returned from Iraq. I can tell this House that the morale of our fighting men and women there is sky-high. They are not suffering from doubt and second-guessing," Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., said in a rare floor speech.

"We are making progress toward our goal, but the battle is not over," he said. "It is a battle we must endure, and one in which we can and will be victorious. The alternative



would be to cut and run and wait for (terrorists) to regroup and bring terror back to our shores."

Rep. David Dreier, R-Glendora, said the resolution "sends a very strong signal to friends and foes alike - the United States of America is absolutely committed to winning the War on Terror."

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