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Iraq bill vote splits state's delegation along party lines
GOP lawmakers say measure hurts war's leaders; Dems say war must end

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WASHINGTON -- South Carolina's four Republican House members voted against a war-spending bill Friday that the House passed which sets timetables and conditions for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

The state's two Democrats backed the bill. The delegation's votes reflected the divisions between the two parties over the direction the country should take on Iraq.

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Lawmakers from both parties said they were supporting U.S. troops with their conflicting votes. In the end, the Democrats squeaked by 218-212 with the help of two Republicans to pass the \$124.3 billion spending bill.

Fourteen Democrats -- seven liberal members of the Out of Iraq Caucus who said the timelines would not end the war soon enough and seven moderates and conservatives who say the conditions are misguided -- voted with Republicans against the bill.

Advertisement In the Upstate, several families of soldiers in Iraq or other parts of the Middle East said they couldn't comment on the House's action Friday, saying by doing so they could jeopardize lives.

Marilyn Miller, whose son is serving in the Middle East, is a member of the Blue Star Mothers, a military support group. She said she had a personal opinion, but she declined to express it because she was asked by the Blue Star leadership to refrain from talking to reporters.

"We do not get involved in politics," Miller said. "My own concern is for the safety of my son." She said her son, a Marine, is scheduled to return home next month.

Shortly before the vote, Rep. Gresham Barrett, R-Westminster, said, "It is important we do not undermine the war effort by placing a cap on our military leaders and the efficiency at which they and their troops can work.

"Talking to military leaders on the ground, I know the mission will be successful. It's important that our troops understand we support them here at home."

Rep. Bob Inglis, R-Travelers Rest, likened the deadlines and benchmarks in the legislation to "writing a lease with an eviction-only remedy for a late payment."

"Withdrawal is the Democratic leadership's only solution if the Iraqis fall short of the benchmarks. That is simply too simplistic. It is tying the hands of the president and the Pentagon."

Rep. Jim Clyburn's assessment of the bill and vote differed sharply. "We all seek to heal our nation by ending the Iraq war. I sincerely believe it is unconscionable to allow this open-ended war to continue, when with this bill, we can begin its ending," he said.

Clyburn, as the Democratic whip, was responsible for marshaling votes to pass the measure.

The House bill would pay for continuing war operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and establish a series of political and military benchmarks that Iraqis would have to meet.

If President Bush cannot certify those benchmarks have been met, the bill would require U.S. troops to be pulled out of Iraq by the end of the year. If the benchmarks are met, the bill requires Bush to begin withdrawing forces from Iraq by March 1, 2008, finishing by the end of August 2008.

There are also billions more for veterans' health care, base realignment and closure costs, aviation and port security, Gulf Coast rebuilding, pandemic flu preparedness, agricultural disaster aid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

It also calls for raising the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 over two years.

The Senate will consider a different plan next week with nonbinding language calling for a withdrawal of most, but not all, troops from Iraq by March 31, 2008.

It also directs the Defense Department to continue to train and equip Iraqi security forces.

The \$121.6 billion Senate spending bill includes funding for many of the same programs in the House bill, but it doesn't include an increase in the minimum wage.

South Carolina Sens. Lindsey Graham and Jim DeMint, both Republicans, believe the United States can still be successful in Iraq and have said they will fight anything they consider to be interference with the Bush administration's Iraq policy.

Graham called the House bill "a disgrace" and accused House Democrats of putting U.S. soldiers at risk.

"The Democratic leadership in the House is like the cavalry in reverse. They're coming over the hill, but instead of helping, you know they are just going to make the problem worse," Graham said Friday.

He noted that Bush has threatened to veto a final spending bill if it includes Iraq provisions similar to the House language.

"The president is right to threaten a veto of this legislation," Graham said. "If this bill ever makes it to his desk, he won't have a shortage of pens available to sign a presidential veto. If necessary, I will be more than happy to bring one for him to use."
