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Congress Gives Bush War Powers

Connecticut's House Members Vote Along Party Lines; Both Senators Vote Yes

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WASHINGTON -- In a somber but not entirely unified display of purpose and bipartisanship, the U.S. Congress early today voted to give President Bush broad authority to act and perhaps wage war against Iraq.

The Senate voted 77 to 23 to approve the war resolution, which requires Bush to work through this country's allies first in the effort to disarm Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's regime. Earlier in the day, the House vote for the measure was 296 to 133.

The message from Congress was that it is united in its desire to force Hussein from power, but not in how to do that. Most of the support, though, was for tough action, even unilateral action if needed.

"We need to speak with a clear voice. As it says in the Bible, if the sound of the trumpet be uncertain, who shall follow?" asked Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, D-Conn., chief Senate sponsor of the White House plan.

Remember, said Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, the outcome did not mean imminent war. It meant the U.S. can deal from a position of strength.

"This vote is not a declaration of war," he said. "It's a declaration of will."

It was the message President Bush wanted. "Today's vote sends a clear message to the Iraqi regime: It must disarm and comply with all existing U.N. resolutions," he said, "or it will be forced to comply."

Some 81 Democrats joined 215 Republicans in the House in voting for the agreement. In the Connecticut delegation, all three Democrats opposed the resolution; all three Republicans voted for it.

Sens. Lieberman and Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., also voted yes.

The final vote count, though, was somewhat less than supporters had sought, as 126 Democrats - a majority of the party caucus - voted no. The Connecticut opponents reflected an uneasy mood among some members that Congress was moving too fast and too aggressively.

"There is division in this House," said Rep. Sander Levin, D-Mich. "Let us not fear our ability to create a new more peaceful world through the science of human relations," added Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio.

A plan authored by Rep. John Larson, D-1st District, and others advocated a two-step process, one that would first have Congress vote on strong action in concert with the UN. If that failed, members would return for a second vote allowing Bush to use force.

That plan lost, 270-155, and a similar effort failed in the Senate by a 75-24 vote.

But it got the backing of many who eventually supported the Bush plan. Simmons spent an hour Wednesday at the Pentagon and another hour and a half reading House Intelligence Committee documents on the Iraqi threat.

Simmons, a former CIA agent, asked himself two key questions: Was the danger clear? And was it present?

"It is [both] for Israel and Turkey and for U.S. troops in certain areas of the Middle East," he said. "It's clear for the U.S., but not present."

There is no need for haste, Simmons concluded; "The danger could be imminent in six months, or it could be six

years," he said. "Nevertheless, there is a substantial gathering danger for the continental United States."

The Larson plan would have bought some time before force would be used. But once that failed, Simmons thought it important the country get behind the president.

Rep. James H. Maloney, D-5th District, felt otherwise. The last delegation member to make up his mind, Maloney began his workday at the Pentagon at a danish-and-fruit breakfast with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and seven other members of Congress.

Maloney asked Rumsfeld to address the immediacy of the Iraqi threat; Maloney came away convinced "there is time to build an international coalition." He thought the Bush plan could too easily lead to unilateral action, a stance that could hurt the war on terrorism, motivate Hussein to attack the U.S., and "further destabilize the Middle East."

None of Connecticut's representatives, though, would go for an alternative pushed by Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., the only member of Congress to vote against giving Bush authority to conduct the war on terror last year. Her plan, which would have the U. S. work strictly through the UN, lost, 365-72.

The lopsided nature of that vote underscored a pervasive mood of the day - resignation. Unlike the 1991 gulf war debate, which had an electricity surging through the chamber, this war debate was carefully structured. Few members were even on the floor most of the time, and there weren't many impassioned speeches.

Larson, for instance, spoke around 11:35 p.m. Wednesday for five carefully-timed minutes.

"It gave me the feeling this was an orchestrated dance with a foregone conclusion," he said.

And indeed, the final hour of the House debate, usually a time when there's a charge in the air, when the speeches are most passionate and the final minds are being made up, instead had the feel of a movie theater where a few people have hung around for the last show.

Some of the seats were filled by teenage pages. International Relations Committee Chairman Henry J. Hyde, R-Ill., his blue tie stretching a third of the way down his leg, had an emotionless, almost bored look. No one talked in the aisles; no one was even in the aisles.

The words were stirring; the extra oomph was often missing. One of the few to emote was House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, who had tears in his eyes as he finished the closing debate speech.

"Mr. President," he said, "we are about to give you a great trust."

The Senate is historically the site of greater debate, since it is not subject to time limits and has a tradition of ringing oratory, and occasionally, members took time and reached higher. Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle, D-S.D., tried to set a tone early in the day.

After days of uncertainty, he revealed he would vote with the president. "I believe that Saddam Hussein represents a real threat," he said, "and because I believe it is important for Americans to speak with one voice at this critical moment, I will vote to give the president the authority he needs."

He made it clear to his colleagues that the vote would address questions of "who we are as a nation."

How the Senate deals with questions of unilateral or first-strike actions, he said, "will have profound consequences - for our nation, for our allies, for the war on terrorism and perhaps most importantly, for the men and women in our armed forces who could be called to risk our lives because of our decisions."

But he warned Bush, on behalf of many senators : "If the administration attempts to use the authority in this resolution without doing the work that is required before and after military action in Iraq, the situation there and elsewhere can indeed get worse."

The chief voice of opposition, and it was a loud, from-the-gut voice, came from Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., who threatened to tie up the Senate indefinitely.

He remembered voting in 1964 for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave President Johnson a blank check to act in Vietnam.

"It was this resolution that led to the deaths of 58,000 Americans, and 150,000 Americans being wounded. It led to massive protests," he said. "It was a war that destroyed the presidency of Lyndon Johnson."

This time, he said, almost shouting, "I want more time. I want more evidence to know that I am right...and I want language that's in this amendment so that Congress can oversee this power grab."

His was a rare voice of passion, though, on an almost eerily calm day that fit the gray skies outside.

"September 11," said Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, explaining why the debate was so subdued. "This is very different from 1991."

This debate, too, was not whether to confront Iraq, but how. It was not whether to put troops in harm's way; that's already happening. And it was not about the threat itself; it was about how imminent it is.

"Those are all matters of policy," said Larson, "and it's hard sometimes to get emotional over fine points of policy."

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