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Bush policies blocked as US mood on Iraq sours

By Rupert Cornwell in Washington

17 June 2005

As American and Iraqi casualties on the ground mount relentlessly, President George Bush is in growing political trouble, with Republicans as well as Democrats questioning his handling of a war that has never been less popular here.

In the most visible protest, the veteran Democratic congressman John Conyers organised a forum on the so-called "Downing Street Memo", the July 2002 British Government document indicating that the Bush administration had already made up its mind to invade Iraq, and that intelligence was being "fixed" to fit that policy.

Six weeks after it was leaked in the British press, the memo has belatedly become a hot topic in Washington. Mr Conyers was to present a petition from more than 100 of his Democratic colleagues in the House, signed by 500,000 people, demanding that Mr Bush explain himself.

The White House has haughtily brushed aside this criticism, saying the memo contains nothing new, and again dismissing charges that the intelligence process was politically manipulated. But the administration may find it more difficult to deal with bipartisan demands for an exit timetable for the 140,000 US troops in Iraq.

One of the sponsors of the congressional resolution is Dennis Kucinich, the Ohio Democrat and staunch opponent of the war, who ran for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination. More worrying for the White House, another sponsor is the North Carolina Republican Walter Jones, a strong backer of the invasion (and an author of the 2003 "freedom fries" campaign against France in Capitol Hill cafeterias).

"I just feel the reason of going in for weapons of mass destruction, the ability of the Iraqis to make a nuclear weapon, that's all been proven it was never there," Mr Jones said. "I feel that we've done about as much as we can do."

The day before, six more US servicemen died in Iraq, bringing the combat casualty total to at least 1,706, with 12,000 wounded. And countless thousands of Iraqis have been killed or wounded in daily suicide bombings.

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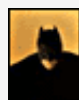
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There is an increasingly sour mood in America, much disillusioned with Mr Bush, and inclined to share Mr Conyers' belief that "we got into a secret war we hadn't planned, and now we're in it we can't get out".

In June 2002, a month before the British memo was written, 61 per cent of Americans favoured the forcible removal of Saddam Hussein, as the next stage of Mr Bush's "war on terror". Today, polls show that only 42 per cent say the war was worthwhile.

Mr Bush's approval ratings have tumbled further, to just 41 per cent, the lowest level of his presidency. One reason is dissatisfaction with the economy, most notably the soaring cost of petrol. But the biggest reason is Iraq, which threatens to undermine his second-term strategy.

The White House had hoped that Iraq would fade as an issue after January's elections. This, it believed, would allow it to focus on Mr Bush's domestic goals of social security and tax reform.

But in the past month alone, 80 US soldiers and more than 700 Iraqis have died and the Pentagon admits that the violence is as bad as a year ago. Even some of its allies blame the White House for not telling the truth about the extent of the insurgency. "We always accentuated the positive and never prepared the public for the worst," Senator Lindsay Graham, a South Carolina Republican, said.

The President's signature policy - the campaign to part-privatise social security - has hit a brick wall. "Exit Policy on Social Security is Sought," was a Washington Post headline, above a report explaining how senior Republicans were urging the White House to quietly drop the measure, since it had no hope of passing.

Other Bush policies are also under attack. In a rare act of defiance, the Republican-led House voted by 238 to 187 to scrap a provision of the Patriot Act, which allows the FBI to check library and bookstore records in anti-terrorism inquiries. The President vows to veto any such change, just as he promises to "stay the course" on Iraq, and to press ahead with social security reform. But the line is growing more difficult to hold.

Last night, Senate Democrats planned to block for a second time a floor vote to confirm John Bolton as the next US ambassador to the United Nations, until the White House releases more information on its embattled nominee. Other Republicans are demanding closure of the Guantanamo Bay prison, although the White House says it is vital for security.

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