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Know When to Quit

Even the last congressional holdouts are ready to leave Afghanistan.

ROBERT DREYFUSS | May 31, 2011 | web only



President Barack Obama speaks to troops as Vice President Joe Biden, left, listens at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. (AP Photo/Mark Humphrey)

President Barack Obama's Democratic base and a majority of Democrats in Congress are poised to revolt if the White House fails to order a sharp drawdown in the number of troops in Afghanistan this month.

That message was clear in the House of Representatives last week, where Democrats and Republicans teamed up to demand an endgame for the war in Afghanistan in a pair of amendments to the 2012 defense authorization bill. The resulting vote, in which dozens of Republicans -- and nearly the entire Democratic caucus -- voted in favor of

drawing down U.S. forces, shows just how widespread opposition to the war has become. As President Obama's self-imposed July deadline approaches, and with Osama bin Laden now out of the picture, pressure on the White House for an accelerated pullout is mounting.

In a speech at West Point 18 months ago, Obama dismayed the liberal wing of his party by acceding to military demands for an additional, 30,000-troop "surge" for the war in Afghanistan; he sought to pacify anti-war forces in his party by announcing that he would begin a drawdown in July 2011. But as the deadline approaches, members within the administration remain divided over how many troops to pull out, and how quickly. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the military is preparing a plan to withdraw just 5,000 troops in July and another 5,000 by the end of the year. Last month, Gen. Douglas Lute, Obama's chief Afghanistan adviser at the National Security Council, told me that the White House hadn't yet settled on a plan for a withdrawal, but he suggested that it was reasonable to expect a gradual withdrawal of the 30,000 troops dispatched in 2009 over 18 months.

In an effort to affect Obama's impending decision on the withdrawal, lawmakers in Congress who were previously content to sit on the fence have begun to speak out against the war.

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"Members know that Obama is engaged right now in the decision-making process," says Paul Kawika Martin of Peace Action, which helped to organize a coalition of peace groups to lobby Congress. "They're thinking, 'If I'm going to say something, now's the time to say it.'"

On May 26, in a vote so close that it surprised even its sponsors, the House narrowly rejected, by a 215-to-204 margin, an amendment to the Defense Authorization Act proposed by Jim McGovern of Massachusetts and Justin Amash of Michigan that would have required the Pentagon to present a plan for the "accelerated transition of military operations to Afghan authorities." It was considered especially significant that Rep. Steny Hoyer, the minority whip and a noted hawk, spoke on the House floor in its favor. "That was a big deal," says Martin.

McGovern's measure did not specify a deadline or include specific numbers, which may have led Republicans and cautious Democrats to vote yes. But last year, a similar measure garnered only 162 votes. This time, all but eight Democrats voted for it, along with 26 Republicans. "I think this is a very, very strong vote, much stronger, quite frankly, than I thought we were going to get," McGovern said.

A stronger measure, also introduced last week by Reps. Jason Chaffetz of Utah and Peter Welch of Massachusetts, would have required the Defense Department to submit a plan for withdrawing U.S. forces in 60 days -- it collected 123 votes. But a similar amendment just two months ago won only 93 votes, and in 2010, just 65 votes. Anti-war feeling is growing even though Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Obama's choice to lead the CIA, has accused its supporters of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. "The Taliban and al-Qaeda obviously would trumpet this as a victory, as a success," he said in March.

Leading members of the House cited the death of bin Laden as a major reason to wind down the war. "We accomplished what we had to do in Afghanistan a long time ago," said Rep. Jerrold Nader of New York. "We ought to stop wasting our troops and our money and our lives and get out. And this just shows that should al-Qaeda establish a base there, we can go in and take it out, as we just did in Pakistan."

In the Senate, things are moving more slowly, but there, too, opponents are becoming more outspoken. Sen. Jeff Merkely of Oregon last week organized a group of nine senators who wrote a letter to President Obama:

We write to express our strong support for a shift in strategy and the beginning of a sizable and sustained reduction of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, beginning in July 2011. ... There are those who argue that rather than reduce our forces, we should maintain a significant number of troops in order to support a lengthy counter-insurgency and nation building effort. This is misguided. We will never be able to secure and police every town and village in Afghanistan.

Among the signers: Barbara Boxer of California, Richard Durbin of Illinois, Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Tom Harkin of Iowa, Kirstin Gillibrand of New York, Tom Udall of New Mexico, Mike Lee of Utah, and Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

In the Senate, anti-war sentiment is building even among members who have previously been strong supporters of the war, including Sen. Carl Levin, Democrat from Michigan, and Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada. Back in May 2010, Reid opposed a proposal by former Sen. Russ Feingold of Wisconsin (he lost his seat last November) setting a timetable

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for an end to the war. Now, Reid is having second thoughts. "I'm not confident that it's going to work," said Reid in April, referring to Petraeus' counterinsurgency strategy. "We cannot continue to keep dumping this money."

But what makes this surge of opposition even more significant is that more and more Republicans have begun to express significant doubts about the war. Traditional conservative and libertarian figures and organizations like the Cato Institute; Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform; the American Conservative Union; and Dick Armeey's Tea Party-linked FreedomWorks have abandoned their neutrality and signed on. Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee, the second ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that he's been "very skeptical about the efforts there for some time" when visiting constituents in Tennessee in early May. The same committee's top Republican, Sen. Dick Lugar of Indiana, has also begun to vocalize doubts that the United States can sustain the war. "With al-Qaeda largely displaced from the country, but franchised in other locations, Afghanistan does not carry a strategic value that justifies 100,000 American troops and a \$100 billion per-year cost, especially given current fiscal restraints," he said.

Polls show that the American people have turned the corner on Afghanistan. A recent survey by *The Washington Post* and ABC News, conducted before the death of bin Laden, revealed that by a margin of 64 percent to 31 percent, Americans no longer believe that the war in Afghanistan is worth fighting. By a margin of 73 percent to 21 percent, Americans favor a substantial withdrawal of U.S. troops in July.

Data like that have forced a sea change among organizations of grassroots Democrats. Howard Dean, the founder of Democracy for America and a former presidential candidate, has switched sides. "I actually supported the president when he sent extra troops to Afghanistan," Dean said. "But I've come to believe that's not a winnable war."

Robert Dreyfuss is a senior correspondent for *The American Prospect*. He is the author of *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*. He can be reached through his [website](#).

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