

It's the War, Senators

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It is not an inspiring sight to watch the United States Senate turn the most important issue facing America into a political football, and then fumble it. Yet that is what now seems to have come from a once-promising bipartisan effort to finally have the debate about the Iraq war that Americans have been denied for four years.

The Democrats' ultimate goal was to express the Senate's opposition to President Bush's latest escalation. But the Democrats' leaders have made that more difficult — allowing the Republicans to maneuver them into the embarrassing position of blocking a vote on a counterproposal that they feared too many Democrats might vote for.

We oppose that resolution, which is essentially a promise never to cut off funds for this or any future military operation Mr. Bush might undertake in Iraq. But the right way for the Senate to debate Iraq is to debate Iraq, not to bar proposals from the floor because they might be passed. The majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, needs to call a timeout and regroup. By changing the issue from Iraq to partisan parliamentary tactics, his leadership team threatens to muddy the message of any anti-escalation resolution the Senate may eventually pass.

As it happens, the blocked Republican alternative, proposed by Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, itself represents an end run around the Senate's constitutional responsibilities. The rational way to oppose cuts in funds is to vote against them, if and when any ever come before the Senate. Mr. Reid should not be shy about urging fellow Democrats to vote against this hollow gimmick, which tries to make it look as if the senators support Mr. Bush's failed Iraq policies by playing on their fears of being accused of not supporting the troops.

America went to war without nearly enough public discussion, and it needs more Senate debate about Iraq this time around, not less. The voters who overturned Republican majorities in both houses last November expect, among other things, to see energized Congressional scrutiny of the entire war — not just of the plan for an additional 21,500 troops but also of the future of the 130,000 plus who are already there.

Another Republican resolution, proposed by Sen. John McCain, gives the appearance of moving in that more promising direction by ticking off a series of policy benchmarks and then urging the Iraqi government to meet them. But listing benchmarks is one thing. It is another to spell out real consequences for not meeting them, like the withdrawal of American military support. Instead of doing that, the McCain resolution hands an unwarranted blank check to Mr. Bush's new Iraq commander, Lt. Gen. David Petraeus. It

breathtakingly declares that he “should receive from Congress the full support necessary” to carry out America’s mission.

Frustrated by the Senate’s fumbles, the House plans to move ahead next week with its own resolution on Mr. Bush’s troop plan. When the Senate is ready to turn its attention back to substance again, it should go further.

Senators need to acknowledge the reality of four years of failed presidential leadership on Iraq and enact a set of binding benchmarks. These should require the hard steps toward national reconciliation that the Iraqi prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki continues to evade and that the White House refuses to insist on.