

## GOPers Join Call For Iraq Debate

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By Ben Pershing, Roll Call Staff

A bipartisan group of lawmakers began a new effort last week to attract support for the idea of holding a lengthy House floor debate on Iraq policy.

On Wednesday, Republican Reps. Walter Jones Jr. (N.C.), Ron Paul (Texas) and Wayne Gilchrest (Md.) joined Democratic Reps. Neil Abercrombie (Hawaii), Ike Skelton (Mo.) and Marty Meehan (Mass.) in co-signing a "Dear Colleague" letter calling for "an open and honest debate on the future of U.S. policy in Iraq."

The six signatories encouraged their colleagues to sign a discharge petition for H.Res. 543, a rule that would allow floor consideration of a resolution introduced by Abercrombie in 2005 requiring President Bush "to develop and implement a plan for the withdrawal" of American troops from Iraq.

Supporters of the discharge petition argue that the House has not had an adequate recent debate on Iraq, even as casualties there have escalated and President Bush has declined to specify when U.S. troops will pull out.

But House Republican leaders dispute the notion that the chamber has not given Members a chance to debate the issue.

"We did that when we chose to go to war and again this fall," said Ron Bonjean, spokesman for Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), referring to the House's November vote on a resolution calling for an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops in Iraq.

"We believe in fighting to win the war on terror overseas rather than having them strike here at home as they did on Sept. 11, [2001]," Bonjean added.

But Jones, one of the House's few outspoken GOP critics of the war, strongly disagreed with the idea that the chamber has given the Iraq issue enough debate time and argued that November's debate was designed solely to humiliate Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.).

"It was not an honest debate on the issue," Jones said, calling the short consideration of the bill an effort to "embarrass a patriot."

"I'm frustrated with my own party, I'll be honest with you," Jones added, saying that he respects Hastert but that he believes his own leadership is out of touch on the Iraq issue.

"I don't know what polls the Republican leadership's looking at, but the ones I've seen aren't very encouraging," he said.

As of March 15, the discharge petition had 72 signatures, all of them from Democrats, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.). (Two Democrats, Reps. Patrick Kennedy (R.I.) and Leonard Boswell (Iowa), signed the petition but withdrew their signatures in December.)

Jones said that he, Paul and Gilchrest plan to sign the petition on April 5, when they will go to the floor with the three Democrats and issue a call for a broader debate.

If passed, H. Res. 543 would allow up to 17 hours of debate on Abercrombie's Iraq resolution, evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats.

Jones said he does not support an immediate withdrawal of troops and hopes  
backers of the Bush administration's policy will participate in the debate.  
"We want people who support being in Iraq to be part of the debate," Jones said.  
"We want to have more than just 30 minutes on each side."

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