

BREAKING: FOUR SENATORS REDISCOVER CONGRESS HAS OVERSIGHT ROLE FOR COMMITTING TROOPS

Don't look for this important bit of news in the New York Times or Washington Post. At least at the time I started writing this, they hadn't noticed that Senators Jeff Merkley, (D-OR), Mike Lee (R-UT), Joe Manchin (D-WV), and Rand Paul (R-KY) put out a press release yesterday calling for a Congressional vote on whether to authorize keeping US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014. President Barack Obama and the Pentagon have been bargaining with Afghan President Hamid Karzai for over a year now to get a Bilateral Security Agreement that will authorize keeping US troops there after the current NATO mission officially ends at the end of this year, but we have heard almost nothing at all from Congress. Well, we did have some hypocrisy tourists calling for Karzai to sign the agreement immediately or suffer the financial consequences, but they didn't call for using their Constitutional role in authorizing use of troops.

This bipartisan group had some pretty strong language about the push to exclude Congress from the decision-making on keeping troops in Afghanistan:

Today, Senators Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Mike Lee (R-UT), Joe Manchin (D-WV), and Rand Paul (R-KY) announced the introduction of a bipartisan resolution calling for Congress to have a role in approving any further United States military involvement in Afghanistan after the current mission ends on December 31, 2014. The Administration is reportedly negotiating an agreement that

could keep 10,000 American troops or more in Afghanistan for another ten years.

"The American people should weigh in and Congress should vote before we decide to commit massive resources and thousands of troops to another decade in Afghanistan," Merkley said. "After over 12 years of war, the public deserves a say. Congress owes it to the men and women in uniform to engage in vigorous oversight on decisions of war and peace."

"After over a decade of war, Congress, and more importantly the American people, must be afforded a voice in this debate," Lee said. "The decision to continue to sacrifice our blood and treasure in this conflict should not be made by the White House and Pentagon alone.

"After 13 years, more than 2,300 American lives lost and more than \$600 billion, it is time to bring our brave warriors home to the hero's welcome they deserve and begin rebuilding America, not Afghanistan," Manchin said. "We do not have an ally in President Karzai and his corrupt regime. His statements and actions have proven that again and again. Most West Virginians believe like I do money or military might won't make a difference in Afghanistan. It's time to bring our troops home."

"The power to declare war resides in the hands of Congress," Paul said. "If this President or any future President has the desire to continue to deploy U.S. troops to this region, it should be done so only with the support of Congress and the citizens of the United States."

After 12 years and hundreds of billions of dollars spent, the Administration has

declared that the war in Afghanistan will be wound down by December 31, 2014. However, the Administration is also negotiating an agreement with the Government of Afghanistan that would set guidelines for U.S. troops to remain in training, support, and counter-terrorism roles through at least 2024.

In November, the Senators introduced this bill as an amendment to the Defense Authorization bill, but it wasn't allowed a vote. In June, the House of Representatives approved a similar amendment to the NDAA stating that it is the Sense of Congress that if the President determines that it is necessary to maintain U.S. troops in Afghanistan after 2014, any such presence and missions should be authorized by Congress. The House amendment passed by a robust, bipartisan 305-121 margin.

But Merkley added yet another zinger. From the AFP story on the move, as carried in Dawn (emphasis added):

"We are introducing a bipartisan resolution to say before any American soldier, sailor, airman or Marine is committed to stay in Afghanistan after 2014, Congress should vote," Democratic Senator Jeff Merkley told reporters.

"Automatic renewal is fine for Netflix and gym memberships, but it isn't the right approach when it comes to war."

Wow. What a concept. Actual politicians saying that their jobs don't consist of applying a rubber stamp to whatever the President wants. They say that they want to carry out their official duties and have a say in whether the US continues to send troops and money into a cause that has been hopeless for years. [I will

interject here that it would be even more refreshing if a similar attitude could break out over automatic renewal of the FISA Amendment Act, but that's probably too greedy.] Of course, with public opinion now solidly opposed to the war, politicians can assume that finally taking a stand will be popular.

As noted in *The Nation*, Congress gave the President a blank check on fighting "terrorism" in the 2001 AUMF, prompting the Senators to speculate on whether the AUMF needs changing if they aren't given a vote on keeping troops in Afghanistan:

If this effort doesn't work out, more aggressive measures could be taken—like modifying the 2001 authorization for use of military force. Manchin said they would "look at everything available" but were first focused on at least having a debate in Congress.

While the 2001 authorization legally allows Obama to continue the war on his own, the Senators present on Thursday feel that the spirit of congressional input would still be violated if the war was extended another decade.

"The president has said repeatedly, including very recently in his State of the Union address, that the military will conclude operations in Afghanistan at the end of 2014. Therefore it only makes sense that any proposal to keep troops in Afghanistan past the end of the year would begin a new chapter in our relationship with Afghanistan," Lee said. "The decision to sacrifice American blood and treasure in this conflict must not be made by the White House and Pentagon alone."

"This is about rejecting military action on autopilot," said Merkley.

Of course, some dirty hippie has been talking

about the 2001 AUMF for years. That is, when she isn't talking about the need to repeal the Iraq AUMF. But at any rate, it is refreshing to see Senators on both sides of the aisle suddenly rediscover the oversight portion of their jobs. Even if it only came from reading the polls.

But wait! There's more! In coverage of this move at The Hill, we see a clear call for a full withdrawal:

The senators on Thursday's resolution, who have previously pressed Obama on quickening the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, said that the public was on the side of a full withdrawal.

"The American people are totally in favor of this direction from every corner of this country," Manchin said.

"When you talk about bringing the troops home and stopping this absolute endless war in Afghanistan, that's the one resonating thing that brings the crowd together."

Gosh, it would be nice if some of this news made it into the primary media.