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(MT photo: Bruce Giffin)

Rhetoric shift

Conyers backs off impeachment talk

by Curt Guyette
12/20/2006



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Someone in the audience was holding a sign that declared simply "Impeach." U.S. Rep. John Conyers, who'd come to the University of Detroit Mercy lecture hall on a Friday night for a give-and-take with more than 100 people, started things rolling by offering a bit of informed advice to the guy calling for President George W. Bush's removal from office.

"You can give that sign a rest," said the long-serving Democrat from Detroit.

That comment represents a startling shift in rhetoric on the part of Conyers. Just as he's about to reach the apex of his power as a legislator, the congressman is stepping back from his attempt last year to begin laying the groundwork necessary to remove Bush from office.

Come January, when his party takes control of the House of Representatives after 12 years languishing in the minority wilderness, the 77-year-old Conyers will be installed as chair of that body's Judiciary Committee.

Over the past six years, no one in Congress has raised more of a ruckus over Bush administration actions than Conyers. As one of the House's most liberal members, he's made an issue of the voting problems that occurred in Florida in 2000 and in Ohio in 2004. He held an unofficial hearing regarding the Downing Street memos (leaked documents from the British government that asserted Bush had decided to go to war in Iraq as early as the summer of 2002 and wanted to tailor intelligence to justify that decision) and the administration's deceit that led us into a disastrous war. He has opposed warrantless wiretaps and constitutionally questionable aspects of the Patriot Act. But, with his party in the minority, he's been in no position to do anything other than protest and build grassroots opposition to policies that he says are a threat to democracy.

So it is telling that one of Bush's most vocal critics is unambiguous and unequivocal in saying that the road to impeachment runs through him, and that road is getting blocked with a concrete barricade.

Just a year ago, in December 2005, Conyers introduced legislation calling for the creation of a special committee "to investigate the administration's intent to go to war before congressional authorization, manipulation of prewar intelligence, encouraging and countenancing torture, retaliating against critics, and to make recommendations regarding grounds for possible impeachment."

As Conyers explained at Friday's event — the first in what he said will be a series of gatherings for public input on the agenda for Democrats who now have a majority in both houses of Congress — impeachment is being taken off the table for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that such an effort has little chance of succeeding. That's not because there's an obvious absence of any culpability on the part of the president, but rather the political realities of the situation.

First off, said Conyers, with Democrats holding just a 51-49 edge in the Senate, bipartisan support would be needed to remove Bush from office, and that support simply isn't there. Even his own party isn't united.

"I know there are some Democratic senators who would never vote to convict," Conyers said.

Of course, impeaching Bush was even more unlikely a year ago when Conyers introduced his resolution.

With Bush now a lame duck, and with Democrats in control of Congress, Conyers — while offering no direct explanation for his impeachment backslide — provided insight into his thinking when he told the audience that the priority now is getting a Democrat into the White House in 2008.

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Conventional wisdom holds that a significant majority of the public wants progress in addressing the issues confronting us, not a bare-knuckled partisan brawl. And impeachment proceedings, Conyers now says, would tie up the new Congress for at least four to eight months, maybe even longer, taking attention from issues that need to be addressed immediately. Chief among those, of course, is the war in Iraq.

The debacle in Iraq is what led to the Republican majority getting "fired" by voters in November, Conyers said. But for Democrats to build on that, and to strengthen their majority in both houses, they must figure out a way to get our troops home as soon as possible. Doing so won't be easy.

At this point, it is generally agreed that there are no good choices for America when it comes to dealing with the Iraq quagmire. Leave immediately and there is the likelihood that those who cooperated with us will be the victims of a bloodbath, and the chance of political chaos. Stay on and money will continue to be diverted from desperately needed social programs into a war that has no end in sight.

The way Democrats deal with this dilemma will directly affect how well they do in 2008, said Conyers, who expressed dismay that Bush and Republican Sen. John McCain — the leading contender for the GOP presidential nomination the next time out — are talking about the need to send more troops to Iraq. But it's not just conservatives who are considering upping troop levels to reverse the disastrous course Iraq's on.

Nevada's Sen. Harry Reid, the incoming Senate majority leader, has said he could support a short-term surge in the number of soldiers in Iraq to help stabilize the situation there, but that he would oppose any increase that would last more than a few months. The Bush administration is said to be leaning to temporarily deploying 15,000 to 30,000 additional troops to secure Baghdad.

Conyers, on the other hand, said Friday that he advocates "getting out of Iraq as quickly and intelligently as we can."

But, he warned, "there are no good solutions to ending this."

As for Bush, Conyers said he still wants to hold Bush accountable for the way he led us into this war, and for his attempts to create an "imperial presidency" in defiance of the Constitution. Subpoenas will be issued, and the president will be investigated, promised Conyers, so that the "power grab" will be "carefully examined" and this overreaching cut back.

"We're going to get answers to all the things we never got answers to," vowed Conyers.

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