

[By Amanda Terkel](#)

In its first votes on the war in Afghanistan since the killing of Osama bin Laden, Congress sent a strong message to President Obama that its patience for the conflict is wearing thin. A measure requiring the President to present a plan "with a timeframe and completion date" for the transfer of military operations to Afghan authorities failed 204-215. It would also have mandated a plan for "negotiations leading to a political solution and reconciliation in Afghanistan" and a new National Intelligence Estimate on al Qaeda.

The withdrawal measure was offered as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, which would authorize \$690 billion in defense spending for the next fiscal year.

The amendment, co-sponsored by Reps. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) and Walter Jones (R-N.C.), gained the support of 178 Democrats and 26 Republicans. A similar amendment in the last Congress received 138 votes in support, but only seven of those were cast by Republicans.

This time, freshmen Republican lawmakers formed the largest bloc in the party in voting for the McGovern amendment, and it picked up the support of three GOP members of the House Armed Services Committee.

Notably, both House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) also voted for the amendment, which likely gave other Democrats an opening to also support the measure.

"It is essential that we fight the smartest war possible against terrorists -- but it is fair to ask how a massive troop presence in Afghanistan continues to help us accomplish that goal," said Hoyer on the House floor on Thursday.

"President Obama has promised a drawdown of U.S. troops in July. Now we hear that might just be a token drawdown. This amendment -- and the vote on this amendment -- can send the President a clear signal of support for a meaningful drawdown of troops," said McGovern before the vote.

Reps. Pete Welch (D-Vt.) and Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) co-sponsored a similar amendment, which would have required the Defense Secretary to present a plan to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan except those engaged in counter-terrorism activities. It failed on a vote of 123 to 294 but gained the support of 18 Republicans. A similar measure this year received 93 votes, just eight of which were from Republicans.

"This is a very clear sign that Congress wants a new policy in Afghanistan," Welch told The Huffington Post after the vote, adding that the death of bin Laden was a major factor in the increased support for withdrawal. "Nation-building for 10 years is ending, even though the votes came up just short. It's very clear there's a growing bipartisan awareness that the time for changing our policy in Afghanistan is here. This gives the President some latitude to accelerate the withdrawal of troops."

He pointed out that the ranking members of the Appropriations Committee, Armed Services Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee all voted for the McGovern-Jones amendment.

"One of the things many of us in the caucus would like to do is ask our ranking members to cooperate and coordinate in developing an aggressive policy," he added.

President Obama has called for withdrawal from Afghanistan to begin in July and be completed by 2014, but he has not yet released an exact timeline. A recent Wall Street Journal report said that U.S. military officers in Afghanistan have drawn up "preliminary proposals to withdraw as many as 5,000 troops from the country in July and as many as 5,000 more by the year's end" -- a small fraction of the 100,000 U.S. troops who are currently in Afghanistan now.