

Despite Attacks, Dems Report Baghdad Visit

by Suzanne Rose

Three Democratic Congressmen refused to bow to the intense propaganda campaign supporting the Bush Administration's war plans, which is preventing clearer heads in the Congress from seriously discussing whether the President's war drive is sane or not. Representatives David Bonior (D-Mich.), Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), and Mike Thompson (D-Calif.) travelled to Iraq at the end of September to view conditions first hand and, through discussions with the Iraqi leadership, help UN inspections resume.

"We have no interests in having a war," Bonior told the press from Iraq. His office said the three went to gauge and report on the effects of a war on ordinary Iraqi citizens, and to demand inspections, Bonior said. "We should go back to the unrestricted regime as before. Let the inspectors do their job, without pressure from the United States and Iraq." The Congressmen met with Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz and Foreign Minister Naji Sabri. "Every effort should be made to resolve the crisis diplomatically," said McDermott. This group of Democrats believes that until UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix says Iraq is hampering the inspectors, there should be no military ultimatum.

At a press conference on Capitol Hill upon their return Oct. 2, McDermott and Bonior described visits to hospitals, water treatment plants, and discussions with doctors and public health professionals. They were appalled at the increase in the rate of malnutrition among Iraqi children, from approximately 4% before the Gulf War, to 25% today. The rates of childhood leukemia and children deformed at birth have gone up 100%, they reported.

Both Congressmen are veterans of the Vietnam War, adding urgency to their wish to prevent a new war. Bonior said a new war would have staggering implications internationally, including for the safety of U.S. citizens at home and at embassies abroad. McDermott said the President has not made the case for war. He referenced the evidence used by President Kennedy in October 1962—the missile installation photos—before launching the blockade of Cuba. But the Bay of Pigs, McDermott said, resulted in a fiasco, because the President had only one-sided advisers around him—as there are not enough opposition voices around President Bush today. President Lyndon Johnson, McDermott warned, couldn't run for re-election after the Gulf of Tonkin.



Rep. David Bonior (left) at press conference on conditions in Iraq. Bonior, Rep. Jim McDermott (right), and Rep. Mike Thompson, all Vietnam war veterans, went to Iraq in late September to try to avert a new war in the Mideast.

Attacked by Chicken-Hawks

Throughout the press conference, Bonior, McDermott and Thompson were attacked by reporters for "trusting Saddam" or "trusting Blix over the President." When one reporter accused them of consorting with the enemy, Bonior said, "We served our country. A lot of criticism has been coming from people who were never there."

The media, as well as Republican and Democratic leadership, lost no time in reviling the veteran legislators for their efforts. Following a CNN Sunday interview on Sept. 29, Republican Whip Don Nickles accused the three of "taking Saddam's line" and becoming spokesmen for Baghdad, undermining Washington's effort to build a coalition against Iraq.

Columnist George Will ran a McCarthyite attack on the trio as apologists for Saddam, in the *New York Post* on Oct. 1. He accused them of playing the role of "Lord Haw Haw," the Nazi propagandist broadcasting into England during World War II. Further hysteria was reflected in a John Podhoretz column in the same issue of the *Post*. Podhoretz claimed the GOP would win a big victory in November's mid-term elections due to Democratic Party corruption scandals, in which he included the Baghdad trip.

Not to be outdone in opportunism, top aides to the "Democratic leadership" were quoted in the Oct. 3 issue of *Roll Call*, blasting Bonior and McDermott for jeopardizing, by making their trip, the Democrats' chances of retaking the House. The unnamed leadership aides added that the chances of Mike Thompson advancing up the leadership ladder are finished. *Roll Call* quoted anonymous Democrats saying, "I think it was extremely harmful and destructive," and similar comments. It is likely these are aides to House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), who broke the back of Democratic resistance to the President's war resolution by embracing it on Oct. 2. Many Democrats privately believe it is Gephardt who has put the knife in the party's election prospects.