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Senate Supports Interrogation Limits

90-9 Vote on the Treatment of Detainees Is a Bipartisan Rebuff of the White House

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The Senate defied the White House yesterday and voted to set new limits on interrogating detainees in Iraq and elsewhere, underscoring Congress's growing concerns about reports of abuse of suspected terrorists and others in military custody.

Forty-six Republicans joined 43 Democrats and one independent in voting to define and limit interrogation techniques that U.S. troops may use against terrorism suspects, the latest sign that alarm over treatment of prisoners in the Middle East and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is widespread in both parties. The White House had fought to prevent the restrictions, with Vice President Cheney visiting key Republicans in July and a spokesman yesterday repeating President Bush's threat to veto the larger bill that the language is now attached to -- a \$440 billion military spending measure.

Senate GOP leaders had managed to fend off the detainee language this summer, saying Congress should not constrain the executive branch's options. But last night, 89 senators sided with Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a former prisoner of war in Vietnam who led the fight for the interrogation restrictions. McCain said military officers have implored Congress for guidelines, adding that he mourns "what we lose when by official policy or by official negligence we allow, confuse or encourage our soldiers to forget . . . that which is our greatest strength: that we are different and better than our enemies."

The vote came hours after Senate Democratic leaders blasted Republicans for canceling a classified briefing on anti-terrorism matters by the director of national intelligence, John D. Negroponte. Senate Democrats also sent Bush a letter demanding more information about how he intends to succeed in Iraq.

The president, who defended his Iraq policies at a news conference Tuesday, plans to deliver "a significant speech on the war on terrorism" today, spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters. He said Bush will "talk in unprecedented detail about the nature of the enemy we face" and "about our comprehensive strategy for defeating" that enemy.

The Senate's 90 to 9 vote suggested a new boldness among Republicans to challenge the White House on war policy. The amendment by McCain, one of Bush's most significant backers at the outset of the Iraq war, would establish uniform standards for the interrogation of people detained by U.S. military personnel, prohibiting "cruel, inhuman or degrading" treatment while they are in U.S. custody.

McCain's allies included Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), a former military lawyer, and Armed Services Committee Chairman John W. Warner (R-Va.). They said new detainee standards are needed to clear up confusion among U.S. troops that may have led to the mistreatment alleged at the Navy's Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba and to the abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

The military came under condemnation throughout the world two years ago upon the release of photos showing U.S. troops humiliating and terrifying inmates at Abu Ghraib. Some low-ranking soldiers have been sentenced to prison for the abuse, but many lawmakers and others said they continue to worry about tactics that border on torture in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay.

In his closing speech, McCain said terrorists "hold in contempt" international conventions "such as the Geneva Conventions and the treaty on torture."

"I know that," he said. "But we're better than them, and we are the stronger for our faith."

In its statement on the veto threat, the White House said the measure would "restrict the president's authority to protect Americans effectively from terrorist attack and bringing terrorists to justice."

But as new allegations of abuse surface, the chorus of McCain supporters is broadening. McCain read a letter on the Senate floor from former secretary of state Colin L. Powell, who endorsed the amendment and said it would help address "the terrible public diplomacy crisis created by Abu Ghraib." Powell joins a growing group of retired generals and admirals who blame prison abuse on "ambiguous instructions," as the officers wrote in a recent letter. They urged restricting interrogation methods to those outlined in the U.S. Army Field Manual on Intelligence Interrogation, the parameters that McCain's measure would establish.

McCain cited a letter he received from Army Capt. Ian Fishback, who has fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. "Over 17 months, he struggled to get answers from his chain of command to a basic question: What standards apply to the treatment of enemy detainees?" McCain said. "But he found no answers. . . . The Congress has a responsibility to answer this call."

Despite his victory last night, McCain has two major obstacles remaining: House GOP leaders object to attaching it to a spending bill, and Bush could veto it. However, senior GOP Senate aides said they believe the differences could be bridged, either by tweaking the measure or by changing the field manual.

The Maryland and Virginia senators voted for the McCain amendment.

Earlier in the day, tension over Iraq triggered an unusually testy exchange between the chamber's top Republican and top Democrat. Negroponte had accepted yesterday a Sept. 22 invitation from Democrats to brief all senators privately on intelligence matters. But Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) said in a floor speech that he had told Negroponte to stay away. Frist said the invitation was a partisan ploy and unnecessary because of periodic briefings to Congress conducted by Negroponte and other administration officials.

"I have been offended" by the Democrats' move, Frist told Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.). Reid replied that canceling Negroponte's planned appearance was another example of the administration and its congressional allies refusing to provide information about progress and challenges in the Iraq war and the broader battle against terrorism.

Reid and at least 39 other Democratic senators sent a letter to Bush saying it was unclear whether "your administration has a strategy for success that will preserve our fundamental national security interests and permit us to bring our troops home." The letter called on Bush "to provide direct answers" to several questions, including the number of adequately trained Iraqi security forces that will be needed to allow U.S. troops to begin withdrawing.

Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Del.) was among several senior Democrats who told reporters that Bush risks a further erosion in public support unless he talks more openly about the challenges in Iraq and realistic plans to overcome them. "It's time the president tell us how he plans on getting us out of the hole he's dug us so deeply into," Biden said.