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### [Murtha's No Lefty, But He's Right](#)

Nancy Pelosi is to be congratulated for her backing of John Murtha for the position of House majority leader. To be sure, this was partly payback to a political ally of the speaker-designate. Far more important, however, it was the first installment on a huge debt owed to the voters who swept the Democratic Party into control of both houses of Congress, based primarily on their frustration over the dismal war in Iraq.

Because of his credentials as a highly decorated Marine veteran and stalwart Pentagon supporter, U.S. Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) was more effective than any other member of Congress in crystallizing the changing American position on Iraq when he dramatically wrote last year, "It is time to bring them home." Not intimidated by the president's "cut-and-run" smears, he said what most Americans have come to believe: The war is not "winnable" and it is time--now, not in 10 years--to let Iraqis make their own history and to get American troops out of the line of fire.

By contrast, his opponent for the House leadership position, U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), disagrees with 60 percent of the voters in continuing to support President Bush in this ever-deepening disaster. As recently as Monday, Hoyer continued to hold an allegedly moderate position that is as divorced from reality as the disgraced former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: "You can transfer authority to the Iraqis ... but we need to do so in a way, hopefully, that will not create greater carnage," he told MSNBC-TV.

What gibberish. In fact, as realists from all sides of the political spectrum, including the president's father, argued before the war started, taking Baghdad was inevitably going to stoke the always smoldering nationalist and religious fires of the Middle East that now engulf Iraq with apocalyptic fury. The toll on Tuesday alone: Scores of scholars were kidnapped from the Education Ministry in a plot reportedly aided by policemen, while 82 others were killed or found dead from clashes, murders and bombings around the country.

What an insult it would be to voters to place a continued cheerleader for the war in the No. 2 spot in the House. To reject the basically conservative Murtha also would be to reject the votes of independents and Republicans who broke with Bush on the war.

"Your courageous leadership ... changed the national debate and helped make Iraq the central issue of this historic election," Pelosi told Murtha in offering her endorsement. "It was surely a dark day for the Bush administration when you spoke truth to power."

Yes, and he did so at a time when Hoyer, and all too many Democrats in Congress, still supinely were accepting or supporting the administration's obsessive insistence that occupying Iraq is the best way to prevent terror attacks. The pro-war wing of the Democratic Party--which, sadly, still includes Sen. Joe Lieberman, who is threatening to blackmail Senate Democrats on the issue--is yet clinging to the neoconservative fantasy of a democratic, Israel-friendly Iraq that can serve indefinitely as a giant base for U.S. troops.

In service to that quixotic quest, they will continue to stubbornly back Bush in his efforts to prolong the war until the end of his term, while pretending to check out the alternatives. Unlike the gruff Murtha, they will quibble about "redeployment" inside Iraq, creating new "benchmarks," "increased oversight," and even that old Bush chestnut, "we will stand down as they stand up."

All of which is just rearranging the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic; the U.S. presence is helping nobody in Iraq. Clarity of purpose in getting out of Iraq is all important, which is why the war's supporters are so desperate to smear forthright critics such as Murtha. Witness Dick Morris joining conservative commentator Sean Hannity in blasting Pelosi for backing Murtha: "He's a leftist, he's a cheerleader for MoveOn.org, and she could have chosen a centrist," Morris said on Fox News. "Instead, she chose the most left guy she could find."

Ridiculous. Murtha, a leftist? Maybe on Iraq, but his record on everything from abortion to gun control to Pentagon budgets makes him an old-school conservative Democrat in this country, as centrist as they come. Of course, pollster operative Morris knows this full well, because it was precisely why Murtha's call for withdrawal was such a political earthquake.

Pelosi, in supporting Murtha, rejected the path of opportunism that has so hobbled the Democratic Party in recent decades. If the Democrats fail to keep faith with the voters on the war, they can forget gaining back the White House in 2008, and it would be a rebuke much deserved.



AP Photo / Dennis Cook