

US House Rejects Obama's Libya Policy

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The House delivered a stinging rejection of President Barack Obama's military intervention in Libya on Friday, voting in bipartisan fashion against authorizing the mission for another year. The president's supporters still held out hope that they could stop an effort to restrict funding for hostilities later Friday.

The overwhelming majority of Republicans and 70 Democrats combined to kill the authorization for the use of force on a lopsided 123-295 vote. GOP leaders allowed it to come to the floor so that they could demonstrate Obama does not have the support of the House for the mission — and they did just that.

The White House scrambled Thursday and Friday to save face by limiting Democratic defections on the authorization measure and the measure that would limit funding for the military intervention in Libya.

National Security Advisor Tom Donilon summoned a small group of liberal House Democrats to the Situation Room at 7 a.m. Friday for a classified briefing. The lawmakers voiced their frustration at the president's refusal to seek congressional approval for America's intervention in Libya, and Donilon gave them greater detail of the "facts on the ground" than Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did in a private Thursday briefing for House Democrats at the Capitol on Thursday, according to participants.

"I think they clarified some points," Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.) said of the president's aides.

Perhaps most important for the White House, three lawmakers who went to the White House urged their colleagues to support the use-of-force authorization in a letter sent shortly after the briefing.

"The mission is necessary to avert the slaughter of Libyans ... [it] has broad international support ... the U.S. role is limited in scope but essential to the success of the humanitarian mission ... [and] the resolution asserts and affirms Article I, the constitutional responsibility of Congress and the applicability of the War Powers Act when the U.S. is engaged in hostilities," wrote Reps. John Garamendi (D-Calif.), Peter Welch (D-Vt.) and Keith Ellison (D-Minn).

But it wasn't enough to hold the Democratic line — much less stop the use-of-force measure from failing.

Republicans — and some Democrats — argued against authorizing the Libya mission along one of two main lines: That the United States should not be engaged in Libya and that the president failed to seek congressional consent under the War Powers Act. Obama has concluded that U.S. action in Libya, including missile strikes, does not constitute "hostilities" and therefore does not require him to get consent from Congress or withdraw.

"The president continues to involve the U.S. military in this illegal conflict," said Rep. Tim Griffin (R-Ark.), a former U.S. attorney who once worked for Bush political guru Karl Rove.

"The president has yet to explain what American interests are at stake and just what outcomes he is hoping to achieve," said Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Democratic supporters of the president said Republicans were playing politics, seeking to embarrass Obama at the expense of America's interests and its credibility with its allies. They repeatedly said that Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi would be the winner if the House voted against U.S. operations in Libya.

Rep. Jim Moran (D-Va.) said those who opposed the president would "side with Qadhafi," and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) warned that the House would send a message not just to the president, but to the world, that "America does not keep faith with its allies."

As the votes drew closer Thursday and Friday, some Democrats' intellectual arguments against handing over power to the executive gave way to political considerations about the implications of weakening a president of their own party.

Even though she voiced support for the mission, Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), who attended the session with Donilon, said on the House floor Friday that the president had put members of Congress in "a devastating position" by failing to ask them for their consent.

But she told POLITICO that she was upset by the "creep of politics" into the debate, which she attributed to Republican efforts to make Obama look bad whatever the merits of the mission or their feelings about war powers.

The House will also consider a Republican-written bill Friday that would prohibit the use of taxpayer funds for hostilities in Libya. That measure would, however, explicitly allow the president to continue certain operations that support the NATO-led effort to assist the rebellion against Qadhafi. Included in the permissible activities: intelligence-gathering and search and rescue efforts.

Neither measure will become law — the authorization measure because it failed in the House and the funding-limitation bill because Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) has no interest in taking it up and the president wouldn't sign it.

But Obama and his top advisers well understand the political significance of the House message.

A Gallup poll released Friday shows that 46 percent of respondents disapprove of the Libya mission, while only 39 percent approve of it — a survey that shows a reversal in public opinion since the early days of the conflict when the approval number stood at 47 percent.

But U.S. intelligence officials told the Wall Street Journal for a Friday story that Qadhafi is "seriously considering" fleeing Tripoli, suggesting that his grip on power is looser than he would like. If true, that could mean a shorter mission — and more votes for the president. Lawmakers declined to discuss the specific information they were given during the classified briefing in the White House Situation Room.

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