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Sent: Sunday, March 20, 2011 10:46 AM
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Subject: Fw: Liberal Dems in uproar over Libya

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Sent: Sunday, March 20, 2011 10:41 AM
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Subject: Liberal Dems in uproar over Libya



Liberal Dems in uproar over Libya

By: John Bresnahan and Jonathan Allen

March 19, 2011 04:27 PM EDT

A hard-core group of liberal House Democrats is questioning the constitutionality of U.S. missile strikes against Libya, with one lawmaker raising the prospect of impeachment during a Democratic Caucus conference call on Saturday.

Reps. Jerrold Nadler (N.Y.), Donna Edwards (Md.), Mike Capuano (Mass.), Dennis Kucinich (Ohio), Maxine Waters (Calif.), Rob Andrews (N.J.), Sheila Jackson Lee (Texas), Barbara Lee (Calif.) and Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D.C.) “all strongly raised objections to the constitutionality of the president’s actions” during that call, said two Democratic lawmakers who took part.

Kucinich, who wanted to bring impeachment articles against both former President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney over Iraq — only to be blocked by his own leadership — asked why the U.S. missile strikes aren’t impeachable offenses.

Kucinich also questioned why Democratic leaders didn’t object when President Barack Obama told them of his plan for American participation in enforcing the Libyan no-fly zone during a White House Situation Room meeting on Friday, sources told POLITICO.

And liberals fumed that Congress hadn’t been formally consulted before the attack and expressed concern that it would lead to a third U.S. war in the Muslim world.

While other Democratic lawmakers have publicly backed Obama — including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and top members of the Armed Services, Foreign Affairs and Intelligence committees — the objections from a vocal group of anti-war Democrats on Capitol Hill could become a political problem for Obama, especially if “Operation Odyssey Dawn” fails to topple Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, leads to

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significant American casualties, or provokes a wider conflict in the troubled region of North Africa.

(Pelosi did not participate in Saturday's call; she is in Afghanistan to meet with U.S. military and diplomatic officials.)

U.S. warships fired more than 100 Tomahawk cruise missiles on Saturday in a bid to knock out Libya's air-defense systems, targeting command-and-control and radar units near Tripoli, the Libyan capital, and the city of Misurata, according to Pentagon officials and media reports. French aircraft attacked armored units loyal to Qadhafi around the city of Benghazi after they ignored international calls for a cease-fire.

Saturday's conference call was organized by Rep. John Larson (Conn.), chairman of the Democratic Caucus and the fourth-highest ranking party leader. Larson has called for Obama to seek congressional approval before committing the United States to any anti-Qadhafi military operation.

"They consulted the Arab League. They consulted the United Nations. They did not consult the United States Congress," one Democrat lawmaker said of the White House. "They're creating wreckage, and they can't obviate that by saying there are no boots on the ground. ... There aren't boots on the ground; there are Tomahawks in the air."

"Almost everybody who spoke was opposed to any unilateral actions or decisions being made by the president, and most of us expressed our constitutional concerns. There should be a resolution and there should be a debate so members of Congress can decide whether or not we enter in whatever this action is being called," added another House Democrat opposed to the Libyan operation.

"Whose side are we on? This appears to be more of a civil war than some kind of a revolution. Who are protecting? Are we with the people that are supposedly opposed to [Qadhafi]? You think they have a lot of people with him? If he is deposed, who will we be dealing with? There are a lot of questions here from members."

The unrest among Hill Democrat resembles, in part, the debates inside the White House, Pentagon and State Department over the last few weeks as the Libyan crisis has unfolded.

The White House has worked to put out a narrative over the last 48 hours portraying Obama as initially opposed to any involvement in a Libyan campaign, with a major change in the president's viewpoint developing over the course of the last week as Qadhafi loyalists appeared to be gaining the upper hand and a humanitarian crisis appeared inevitable.

While Defense Secretary Robert Gates led administration opponents of any U.S. role in the anti-Qadhafi operation, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton backed calls from the French and British governments for a NATO-led effort to assist the Libyan rebels. The Clinton clique eventually prevailed in the debate, and Clinton then worked with U.S. allies to craft a U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing the mission.

The Security Council then approved a resolution on Friday authorizing a "no-fly zone" for portions of Libya controlled by anti-Qadhafi rebels, as well as "all necessary measures to

protect civilians under threat of attack in the country,” according to a U.N. statement.

With U.S. attacks already being launched, it was unclear what, if anything, Democratic opponents of the Libyan campaign could actually do to stop it. They could try to offer an amendment for under the 1973 War Powers Act, which would require a withdrawal of U.S. forces from any conflict within 60 days if the president lacks congressional approval, although it is unlikely that pass.

They could also seek to cut off funding for any extended military effort, although it is unclear how long or what the White House anticipates the cost of the operation could be.

Kucinich’s call to explore the impeachment question “got no support from anyone else on the call,” said another Democrat.

Yet there is growing unhappiness within Democratic ranks on Obama’s handling of the Afghanistan conflict, and with Obama gearing up for his 2012 reelection campaign, he will need the backing of liberal and progressive factions within his party — already disenchanted over some of the president’s fiscal and tax policies — in order to defeat any Republican challenger.

Recent opinion polls show the American public is also tiring of the Afghan war. On Thursday, 85 House Democrats — and eight Republicans — backed a Kucinich resolution calling for removal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Dec. 31.

A total of 321 House members, including Pelosi and Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.), opposed the Kucinich measure.

On the Senate side, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) offered a similar resolution, but so far, it has only garnered three cosponsors.



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