

[By Jessica Brady](#)

House liberals will use this week's debate on the annual defense authorization bill to push an anti-war ideology that has been overshadowed in the ongoing debate over fiscal matters, even if the philosophy is unlikely to prevail.

"We have the opportunity to bring some real attention to Afghanistan," Rep. Raúl Grijalva said of Democratic amendments calling for an earlier troop withdrawal. "We're not going to win the vote, but for our Caucus to have a significant vote I think will be very important."

The Arizona lawmaker explained the sentiment many liberals expressed during a Democratic Caucus meeting Tuesday — that a strong showing on the floor, even for a failed vote, could apply pressure to President Barack Obama to reframe his approach to the war in Afghanistan. The administration is scheduled to begin a troop drawdown in July and to complete it by 2014, and some Democrats maintain Obama needs to implement a wholesale withdrawal in the region that military forces have occupied since 2001.

"Our job here is to make our independent judgment," said Rep. Peter Welch, the sponsor of an amendment to withdraw troops in Afghanistan. "I think to the extent that we can demonstrate Congressional support, particularly if it's bipartisan, for a policy review, it'll give the president more political flexibility to make that change."

The Vermont Democrat also said his amendment, which includes conservative Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) as a lead sponsor, could give Obama political cover to retool his Afghanistan strategy if it wins strong support on the House floor. Welch, a deputy whip, said he was rallying Democratic colleagues and predicted many would support his efforts. But a similar effort by Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) in March to pass an Afghanistan withdrawal resolution won the support of only 85 Democrats, and it failed 93-321 on the floor.

Despite the grim prospects for such proposals, lawmakers have offered plenty of them, many of which were considered during a lengthy Rules Committee markup on Tuesday. Rep. John Garamendi (D-Calif.), along with Welch and others, proposed an amendment limiting funds for

counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan, while a bipartisan group of six Members offered an amendment that seeks to limit the definition of "war on terror."

And unlike the long-running debt limit and budget debates that have been dominated by partisanship, the issue of Afghanistan has drawn together strange bedfellows that Democrats said underscore the importance of their efforts.

"This is bipartisan. If we're going to be successful on anything, changing our policy in Afghanistan, getting our budget under control, we've got to find areas of common ground," Welch said, noting that "working with Mr. Chaffetz is a way to send that signal that we're working together."

Another added benefit, one Democratic aide pointed out, is that such proposals could show splinters within the GOP Conference. Tea-party-backed freshmen, who are deficit hawks, may feel pressure to reel in military spending and could further be swayed on the issue of Afghanistan in the wake of the killing of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

"We've done these votes before and we know our people; they don't know their people," the Democratic leadership aide said. "This is the first round of defense votes for these new GOP freshmen, so it'll be interesting to see where they're at."

Freshman Rep. Trey Gowdy said he was undecided on the host of Afghanistan proposals, but he said he was eager for Obama to review his policy in short order.

"The country has been very patient, but a lot of resources, financial being the least of them, are being consumed over there," the South Carolina Republican said. "I think there are some people in the freshman class whose conservative credentials are unassailable that share my desire for a clearer articulation of the status quo in the near future, and I emphasize the near future."

Gowdy said he was less eager to vote on the issue of Libya, a topic that has rattled Members since March, when Obama committed military troops to the North African country before

consulting Congress.

Kucinich wants consideration of an amendment calling for an automatic troop withdrawal, and while Congressional aides from both sides maintain that Members want to address the issue, they generally feel that taking such a definitive stance would be premature.

"I don't think there's a lot of Members that are as interested in the issue as intensely as [Kucinich] is," a Democratic leadership aide said.