

Thomas confirmation now seems assured



WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas grew more likely Tuesday as two more Democrats declared they would vote to put him on the nation's highest court.

The additional Democratic support came before the Senate agreed to vote next Tuesday at 6 p.m. on the Thomas nomination. Debate was scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. Thursday.

Endorsements by Sens. Richard Shelby of Alabama and Alan J. Dixon of Illinois brought to 11 the number of Democrats who have pledged to vote for Thomas' confirmation.

That means Thomas appears to have the 51 votes needed to survive a floor fight, even if three Republicans should break ranks from the 43-member GOP minority, as his opponents hope.

And with at least one more Democrat said to be leaning his way, Thomas could have some room for comfort.

Thomas, a conservative federal appeals judge and a black born into poverty in the segregated South, "brings a unique perspective ... that would better enable the Supreme Court to ensure that the rights and freedoms of all Americans are preserved and strengthened," Shelby said.

"Clearly, Judge Thomas' long suit is his life story, which is compelling, moving and endearing," Dixon said in a statement issued late in the day.

Dixon also said he was convinced that Thomas's thinking was not bound by rigid ideologies. "Some justices on the current court appear to have fairly rigid philosophies or ideologies. Judge Thomas does not appear to fall into that category. That suggests he may well surprise some of his opponents."

The vote on Thomas' nomination will not take place before the Supreme Court begins its fall term on Monday.

The plan, which eliminates any threat of a filibuster by opponents, was adopted unanimously at the suggestion of

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, D-Maine, after a day of negotiations.

Meanwhile, Thurgood Marshall, the nation's first black Supreme Court justice, officially departed the high court on Tuesday. Marshall had originally said he would not make his retirement effective until his successor had been approved.

If confirmed, Thomas would be the first Supreme Court nominee to win approval without the endorsement of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which arrived at a 7-7 deadlock on Thomas last week but nonetheless sent the nomination to the floor.

The seven Democrats who voted against Thomas expressed doubts about his legal qualifications and whether he was candid when he said he had an open mind about abortion and other controversial issues.

Some Democrats said they couldn't believe Thomas' disavowals of writings and speeches that espoused conservative views.

But Shelby's support for the nomination was an indication that Alabama's other Democratic senator, Howell Heflin, was not pressing the case against Thomas. Heflin's opposition to Thomas helped forge the tie vote in the Judiciary Committee.

Even Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., D-Del., the panel's chairman, has said that he does not plan to work actively against Thomas despite his negative vote in committee.

That leaves Thomas' opponents scrambling to hold the line against more Democratic defections.

Nan Aron, executive director of the Alliance For Justice, called the developments "bad news" for Thomas' opponents.

So far, none of the 43 Republican senators has come out against Thomas, though opponents say they are hoping to win over three pro-choice members within the minority — Jim Jeffords of Vermont, Bob Packwood of Oregon and William Cohen of Maine.

Gates accused of altering data

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senior intelligence analysts told senators in scathing testimony Tuesday that Robert Gates, President Bush's nominee to head the CIA, systematically distorted data and stifled dissent while at the agency.

The allegations, at the start of a third week of confirmation hearings for Gates, were aired after the Senate Intelligence Committee heard them privately last week and deemed them sufficiently serious to merit a public debate.

The thrust of the accusations was that Gates, as head of CIA intelligence analysis and then as deputy and acting CIA director, skewed intelligence information to conform with the anti-Soviet policy slant of his Reagan administration bosses and his own strongly held anti-Soviet views.

Gates, a Soviet specialist who serves as Bush's deputy national security aide, has strongly denied such allegations and will have a chance to rebut them later this week.

A veteran intelligence official, Hal Ford, told the committee the United States deserves a CIA director "whose analytic batting average is better than that — especially if he tends to force his views on the intelligence community."

The senior Republican on the committee, Frank Murkowski of Alaska, noted Gates' denials that he had distorted analyses and said that "those who assert to the contrary have a very heavy burden of proof."

Democrats, however, who until now have raised little concerted opposition despite conflicting accounts of Gates' possible role in the Iran-Contra affair, seemed disturbed by accusations of a "politicization" of intelligence.

"Gates' role was to corrupt the process and ethics of intelligence" in two areas held dear by his late boss, CIA Director William Casey, testified Mel Goodman, a former Soviet division chief and currently a senior instructor at the National War College.



Making faces

Oscar the Freshman creator Neal Skorpen adds comic relief to the side of Watson Hall Monday.

Photo by Kim Nguyen



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