

Senate mulls over vote after weekend hearings



WASHINGTON (AP) — Supporters of Clarence Thomas as worked Monday to preserve Senate support for his Supreme Court nomination as senators "pained and perplexed" by sexual harassment allegations decided how to vote.

The vote is scheduled for Tuesday night after eight hours of debate time.

A key Southern Democrat, Sen. J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana, reaffirmed his support for Thomas, saying the allegations by University of Oklahoma law professor Anita Hill had not changed his mind about the nomination.

"I believe Judge Thomas is qualified. I said so two weeks ago. I know nothing that has transpired in the meantime to take away from that," said Johnston, who led a group of Southern Democrats to oppose Robert Bork's failed Supreme Court nomination in 1987.

But others were wrestling with the issue as another former aide to Thomas, Sukari Hardnett, told The Associated Press that black women in his office at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission felt they were objects of his sexual interest and physical inspection.

"I am generally undecided," said Sen. J. James Exon, D-Neb., who had been a Thomas supporter before Hill's allegations surfaced.

Hardnett, another former assistant to Thomas at the EEOC, told Senate investigators that some black women who worked in his office felt they were "an object of sexual interest" and physical inspection by him.

Hardnett, who worked for Thomas from 1985 to 1986, did not allege sexual harassment but said, "If you were young, black, female and reasonably attractive, you knew full well you were being inspected and auditioned as a female."

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., who had originally been a Thomas supporter, said the hearings left him undecided.

"I'm as pained and perplexed as the rest of America," Lieberman said on NBC. "It's quite possible ... that we're not able to decide that anybody is lying," he said.

Thomas would have 52 votes, barely a majority, if 41 Republicans and 11 other Democrats stick with pledges of support made before Hill's allegations surfaced.

Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-

Ariz., another Thomas supporter, predicted the Senate would approve the nomination in a vote that both sides expected to be close.

"I believe Clarence Thomas. The American people believe Clarence Thomas. I have no idea where the votes are," said Sen. John Danforth, R-Mo., the nominee's mentor and champion on Capitol Hill.

President Bush, who returned early from a three-day weekend at Camp David to direct the lobbying effort, said support for Thomas was still "holding strong" despite Hill's explosive allegations.

Hill returned to her home in Norman, Okla., where she reiterated her charge and chastised Republicans for attacking her character.

"I am not imagining the conduct to which I testified," she said. "The personal attacks on me without an iota of evidence were particularly offensive," she said at a news conference.

The White House strategy was keyed at holding Southern senators with large black constituencies who accounted for seven of the 13 Democrats who had announced their support for Thomas last month.

In remarks clearly aimed at these Southerners, Bush said:

"It's important to note that among Afro-Americans, black Americans, that the support is very, very strong. That is significant and I think highly important."

Senate Republicans and the White House were pursuing a strategy of persuading senators that Hill's testimony produced insufficient evidence and that Thomas deserved the benefit of any doubts.


White House vote counters were combing the list of 13 Democratic supporters, looking for weak spots.

However, the conflicting testimony of Thomas and Hill in three days of extraordinary hearings did not appear to have changed the minds of senators on the Judiciary Committee, which last month stood neutral on Thomas' nomination by a 7-7 vote.

A senior administration official, who requested anonymity, said that "among the senators that are pledged, most of them are firm, but there are some that have to be checked with and you have to work on the undecideds."

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