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Ethics committee to revamp rules



WASHINGTON (AP) — As the Senate Ethics Committee moves deeper into the sexual harassment case of Sen. Bob Packwood, its new leaders promise to accelerate investigations and end the panel's reputation as a procrastinator's club.

Chairman Richard H. Bryan and Vice Chairman Mitch McConnell already have ruled decisively on how the committee will investigate Packwood, R-Ore., accused by some two dozen women of making uninvited sexual advances.

And Bryan, D-Nev., has put a stop to one of the committee's most time-consuming traditions, the attempt to reach a unanimous, 6-0 vote on disciplinary decisions by the committee, which consists of three Democrats and three Republicans. Now, a majority vote will carry the day, he says.

"Procrastination is the thief of time," said Bryan, quoting the 17th Century and 18th Century English poet Edward Young. "We are committed to making decisions."

And plenty of tough rulings will be necessary in the Packwood case, as the committee must be fair to a senator accused of boorish behavior and protect the reputations of his female accusers.

The committee went through

a housecleaning after last year. Former Chairman Terry Sanford, D-N.C., was defeated. Vice Chairman Warren Rudman, R-N.H., left the Senate. Three others wanted no part of a committee that has become a punching bag for editorial writers and, less publicly, fellow senators, over delays and punishments that some considered too soft.

The only holdover was Bryan, a freshman senator who wasted no time after his 1988 election in seizing upon a controversial issue — his plan to raise automobile fuel efficiency standards.

Two-term senator McConnell, R-Ky., also no stranger to tough issues, is the Republicans' point man on reforming campaign finance law. He spoke for many colleagues when he mused aloud, "None of us ran for the Senate saying, 'The first thing I want to do is ... to be on the ethics committee.'"

The panel now includes its first woman, Democrat Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, and senators Thomas Daschle, D-S.D.; Ted Stevens, R-Alaska and Robert Smith, R-N.H.

McConnell asked the committee's critics to "see if these six members can move the docket, handle the cases efficiently and function with a minimal amount of impact on senators' times. If we can do that my guess is there will be fewer complaints."

He described fellow commit-

'Procrastination is the thief of time. We are committed to making decisions.'

— Sen. Richard H. Bryan,
Ethics Committee chairman

tee members as "fresh to the process," but admitted, "After two years we may all be bloodied, beat up, discouraged and recommending something brand new, but I don't think that's the case at the outset."

In its first substantive meeting in the Packwood case, the committee adopted a permanent rule that prohibits consideration of any witness' sexual history.

And for Packwood's case specifically, the committee said the investigation would look at allegations by some of the women that Packwood tried to discredit them to keep them from going public.

The committee has been battered by criticism for its interminable investigations — some two years in the case of five senators tied to thrift owner Charles H. Keating Jr., and only slightly less time in other cases.

Last year, as a rank-and-file member, Bryan ended the tradition of seeking a consensus.

Charges dropped in reporter's beating

SANTA MONICA, Calif. (AP) — A judge dismissed attempted murder charges against three drifters accused along with two others in the beating and robbery of ABC news correspondent Gary Shepard in his home in November.

Superior Court Judge James Albracht ruled Monday there wasn't enough evidence to try Charles Ray Hicks, 25; John Girou, 18; and Zoran Marjanovec, 19, in the Nov. 2 attack.

Hicks still faces charges of robbery, burglary, mayhem, auto theft and receiving stolen property. Girou and Marjanovec, a Norwegian national, were charged with receiving stolen property.

Larry Dean Morris, 30, and Andrew Michael Winder, 22, pleaded innocent to related charges.

The journalist isn't testifying against his alleged attackers, said Deputy District Attorney Harvey Giss. Shepard, 54, suffered severe head injuries when he was beaten with a fireplace poker. He testified in December he has no memory of the attack or events preceding it.

Questions to the network regarding Shepard were referred to a spokeswoman in New York, who didn't immediately return phone calls.

The five men were arrested Nov. 4 trying to sell Shepard's car, police said.

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