

Senate meets to debate dismissal of impeachment case

The Senate met behind closed doors to weigh a Democratic proposal to end the trial by Friday

By David Espo
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate closed its doors Monday to debate a Democratic attempt to dismiss all charges against President Clinton and bring his impeachment trial to an end. House prosecutors pressed their case for testimony by Monica Lewinsky and a shortened list of additional witnesses.

Senators deliberated into the night in a rare secret session as the White House, confident of Clinton's ability to win eventual acquittal, announced it would ignore a written list of questions submitted by Majority Leader Trent Lott and other Republicans.

An attempt by two Democrats to open the debate to the public was rejected, 57 senators voting against it and 43 for it. A two-thirds majority was needed to pass.

The senators began their closed-door debate after two final hours of arguments by the White House and House prosecutors on the question of dismissal.

Rep. Henry Hyde, the lead prosecutor, told the Senate that dismissal would mean that "charges of perjury, obstruction of justice are summarily dismissed, disregarded, ignored, brushed off, and these are charges that send

ordinary folk to jail every day of the week and remove federal judges."

There will be continuing contention about Clinton's case, he said, unless the articles of impeachment themselves are brought to a vote.

"The case cannot be made. It is time to end it," countered Nicole Seligman, a private attorney who has long represented Clinton and is part of his impeachment defense team.

No votes are expected before Tuesday or possibly Wednesday, but after more than two weeks, the first presidential impeachment trial in 131 years was fast approaching a pivotal moment.

House Republicans are expected to produce a formal proposal for witnesses on Tuesday, to be voted on after the democratic attempt to dismiss the charges.

A decision by the House prosecutors to winnow their witness list during the day marked an attempt to hold the support of wavering Republican senators whose votes will be crucial when the roll is called.

Lewinsky remains at the top of the list, House officials said, and there is continued interest in seeking testimony from Betty Currie, the president's secretary. Additional consideration is being given to adding presidential friend Vernon Jordan to the list, or perhaps a White House aide, either Chief of Staff John Podesta or Sidney Blumenthal.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the idea of trying to question Kathleen Willey had been dropped, as had the idea of summoning any of a handful of other, less well-known women who have alleged that Clinton made unwelcomed sexual advances. House prosecutors had long sought their testimony to see whether Clinton or associates tried to intimidate them to change their stories.

"We've got to prioritize this and get down to the bare minimum and not run the risk of getting zero witnesses because we put on too many," said Rep. James Rogan, R-Calif., a member of the House team prosecuting the president.

Prosecutors and defense lawyers were each granted an hour to argue the motion to dismiss the charges.

But Republican leader Lott claimed enough votes to squash the attempt, and no Democrat disputed him. In fact, one Democrat, Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, sought unsuccessfully to have the effort to dismiss separated into two votes, one for each article of impeachment, thereby leaving open the question of how he might vote.

At the same time, democrats expressed confidence they could produce enough votes to make it clear that Clinton will eventually be acquitted on the impeachment charges. It takes a majority vote to dismiss the charges, but two-

thirds to convict the president.

The bid to open deliberations, led by democratic Sens. Tom Harkin of Iowa and Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, drew the support of 40 Democrats and three Republicans. Opposed were 52 Republicans and five Democrats.

"The sergeant at arms will please close the doors," Chief Justice William Rehnquist ordered as soon as the roll call had been announced.

Senators in both parties have begun to call in increasing numbers for an end to the trial, which has consumed virtually all the Senate's time since it convened on Jan. 3.

Democratic support for Clinton has hardened over that period, virtually assuring his acquittal when the final vote is called. But now some Republican senators, too, are publicly urging an end to the trial, at the same time House Republicans are pressing to extend the proceedings.

"There's a feeling that if the House managers have their way we're never going to get a bipartisan conclusion," Democratic Sen. Richard Durbin of Illinois told reporters before the day's trial session.

Republicans, too, favor bipartisanship, but not at any price. "There ought to be a way to have an exit strategy that's honorable," said Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens.

At least one stab at bipartisanship was made during the day, as GOP Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas

met with Democratic Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts on a possible agreement. No deal was struck on what officials said was a GOP suggestion for a limited number of witnesses to be questioned in private on a compressed timetable before a final vote.

The day began with members of both parties meeting separately to weigh a Democratic proposal to bring the trial to an end by Friday with a vote on the articles of impeachment themselves. That would have ended any chance of witnesses.

The idea was "summarily rejected by Lott and the Republican" caucus, according to John Czwartacki, a spokesman for the majority leader.

That left each side wondering how the roll call would come out on witnesses.

Republicans, seizing on a comment made Saturday by White House lawyer Gregory Craig, dispatched several questions to the White House for the president's "personal response, in writing, and under oath."

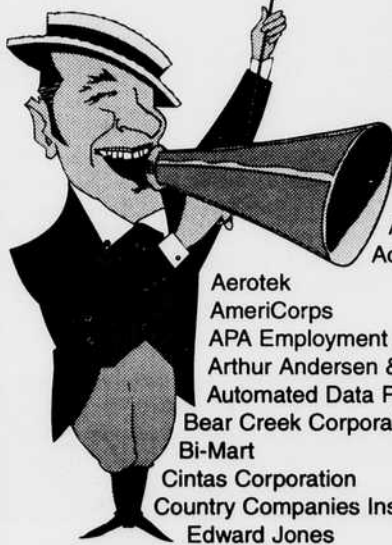
The questions dealt with issues including Clinton's testimony in his deposition in the Paula Jones lawsuit and before Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's grand jury.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said questions to the president are "not called for in the Senate procedure" and Clinton won't answer them.

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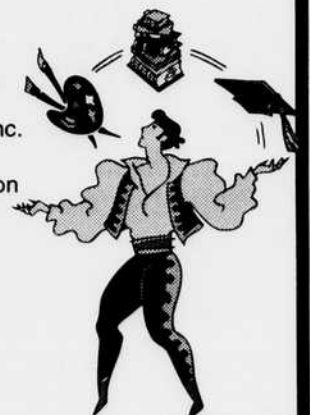
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