

GOP gears up to enact ambitious Bush agenda

Jill Zuckman

Chicago Tribune (KRT)

WASHINGTON — Hours after securing control of the House and Senate, Republicans began making plans Wednesday to do everything President Bush had been denied since Democrats seized the Senate last year.

At the top of the list is a strenuous effort to make last year's tax cuts permanent, to allow for greater business expensing and to cut the capital-gains tax.

"I think the tax code is an absolute abomination that discourages investment and incentives and growth, and is unfair," said new Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., who was back at work and on the phone with Bush early Wednesday morning. "Just take your pick, there's so much we need to do."

Added House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois: "No one can plan their estate with a temporary tax plan."

In an interview with the Tribune, Hastert said that Congress needs to further change the tax code to spur the economy and prompt people to

make investments in the market. "There's a whole menu of things we can do," he said.

As Republican senators began jockeying for committee chairmanships and conservative special interest groups lobbied to place their causes on the to-do list, a few Democrats warned that the new balance of power is no guarantee that Bush, Lott and Hastert will get all they want.

"We're not going away," said Sen. Tom Daschle, the Democratic leader from South Dakota. "We're going to be fighting for the things we believe in. We're going to fight for the issues and the priorities — the reasons we're in the business, in the fight to begin with — and we're going to keep doing that, regardless of whether we're in the majority or in the minority."

Republicans expect to have at least 51 seats in the new Senate, while Democrats will number at least 48 plus the vote of one independent. In Louisiana, Sen. Mary Landrieu, a Democrat, must compete in a run-off election Dec. 7 against Republican

Suzanne Terrell, leaving the final Senate tally in doubt.

In the House, Republicans upended history, which says the party that occupies the White House usually loses ground in a midterm election, and gained four seats for a total of 227. Democrats won 203 seats and there is one independent. Results in four seats are not final.

Despite being relegated to the minority, Democrats could pose a substantial obstacle for Republican plans in the Senate. That's because the rules of the Senate give every lawmaker powerful tools to slow, stop and kill legislation. Anything that is remotely controversial usually requires 60 votes to cut off filibusters and pass the chamber.

"Most substantive measures will require bipartisan cooperation," said Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., who was elected to a second term Tuesday. "They will need Democratic support."

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New Senate expected to give less scrutiny to war on terror

Frank Davies

Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — Republican control of the presidency and Congress means less scrutiny and oversight of the Bush administration's plans for war against Iraq and how it combats terrorism abroad and at home, congressional analysts said Wednesday.

The GOP takeover of the Senate means no more Democratic chairmen holding hearings or probing administration policies, from the handling of intelligence data and analysis about Iraq to how the Patriot Act is being used in counterterrorism.

"Inevitably there will be weaker and more accommodating oversight, until something goes badly wrong," said Thomas Mann, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and an authority on Congress.

"Holding hearings, focusing attention on Iraq or how the Patriot Act is working — sometimes that's as important as legislation, and now that's not likely to happen," said Ross Baker, a Rutgers University professor

who has studied the Senate for years.

Lee Hamilton, former chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and a Democrat, predicted Congress will be "much less willing to give careful scrutiny to what the executive branch is doing."

"The House is already compliant and now the Senate will be, to a degree," he added.

Some experts see little change in policy over Iraq after the GOP takeover, noting that Democrats were badly divided on the issue and few Democratic candidates wanted to raise it during the campaign.

But several changes in the Senate highlight how the oversight will change:

■ Sen. Bob Graham, the Florida Democrat who chaired the Senate Intelligence Committee, became an outspoken critic of the administration's preoccupation with Iraq. Graham and Sen. Richard Shelby, the Alabama Republican and ranking member, pressured the CIA to declassify more intelligence data. Some of that analysis contradicted the administration's as-

sertions about the threat from Iraq.

Graham and Shelby, as part of a normal rotation, are leaving the committee. The new chairman is likely to be Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., a more reliable ally of the administration who defended the CIA during recent hearings.

■ Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., gives up the Senate Armed Services chairmanship to Sen. John Warner, R-Va., a staunch Bush ally. Levin voted against the Iraq resolution and criticized "intelligence failures" by the CIA at last month's hearings.

■ Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., held several hearings as Judiciary chairman on how increased police powers in the Patriot Act were being used and sharply questioned some of Attorney General John Ashcroft's decisions.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, the incoming chairman, said last summer that much of the criticism of Ashcroft was "hysterical."

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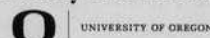
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