

national

Election Aftershocks

Congress faces a new political era

by Bob Roehr

Aftershocks from the Nov. 7 election continue to rumble through the landscape of Washington, D.C., with uncertainty and speculation—major commodities on the political scene.

Absentee ballots were still being counted when President Bush held a news conference Nov. 8 announcing the retirement of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and nomination of former CIA head Robert Gates as his successor. The change removed a lightning rod for criticism on the war in Iraq and was an important symbol of openness to change, but it remains to be seen whether there is any substance behind the symbolism, or if in fact conditions in Iraq allow for any compromise.

Bush lunched Nov. 9 with presumed House Speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and both pledged to make nice, in her words, "in a way that gets results for the American people."

Outgoing Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., under fire for his handling of the scandal surrounding U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, R-Fla., announced that he would not seek a Republican leadership post in the new legislative session. While removing one option from an anticipated leadership fight, it did little to resolve what direction that party will take.

Moderate Republicans suffered some of the heaviest, though not the only, losses in the election, and their caucus is weaker. Some conserva-

tives are trying to spin defeat on the loss of ideological purity, while pragmatists see a need to move toward the center in trying to return to power.

Democrats have their own series of tensions in both houses of Congress. Regaining a majority came largely, though not exclusively, with candidates who often are on the right of their caucus on many issues. Above all else, many of the newcomers share a sense of wanting politicians from both parties to work together to accomplish things. The key issue, as is often the case, will be how to pay for those things.

Pelosi contributed to the potential for Democratic tension by personally endorsing John Murtha of Pennsylvania for the position of majority leader Nov. 12. The No. 2 position with House Democrats is held by Steny Hoyer of Maryland, who is running for leader. Murtha is a retired Marine who has led the party's opposition to the war in Iraq and is generally regarded as conservative, while Hoyer is a traditional liberal. Hoyer and Pelosi have been rivals in the past.

Many of the incoming committee chairs, including openly gay U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., who will head up financial services, represent more liberal districts. They say they will be pragmatic. But even with matters of investigation, one person's definition of pragmatism might seem to another to be an ideologically driven assault.

They'll be egged on by "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party," which has found a useful tool in blogs for motivating an active liberal minority. It was enough to beat U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman in the Democratic primary but not enough to bring Ned Lamont a victory over the newly Independent Lieberman in the general election, even though the cards were stacked in his favor.

Democrats with national aspirations and those vulnerable to a primary challenge will have to take the power of the blogosphere into account.

Queer concerns seem likely to be, at best, second- or third-tier issues for the incoming Democratic leadership. It is not that they don't care about such things, but rather that they will seek to focus initial attention on concerns that have a broader constituency such as congressional reform, health care and raising the minimum wage.

Plans also are being put together in the Senate, now that it has become clear that the Democrats will control that chamber as well. Of most immediate concern to many queers is reauthorization of the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act. News that three people have died



U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., will head up the health committee responsible for reauthorization of the Ryan White CARE Act.

while waiting to get on the AIDS Drug Assistance Program in South Carolina has added some impetus to concerns of inadequate funding.

U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., will take over as chairman of the powerful health committee. He was heavily involved in crafting the current version of the Ryan White legislation, which passed the House but ran into opposition from a handful of senators, including Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y. It is unclear how willing he will be to address their concerns, most of which could be met with greater overall funding. Perhaps reauthorization will be forced through during the lame duck session of this Congress, between now and Christmas. **10**

BOB ROEHR is a freelance reporter based in Washington, D.C.

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