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# Frist Confident About Medicare Bill

Senate Expected to Decide Before Holiday; Democrats Gear for Filibuster

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Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) expressed confidence yesterday that he has the votes to pass a landmark Medicare prescription drug package before the Senate heads home for the Thanksgiving holiday, perhaps as early as today.

But Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and an eclectic band of rebel lawmakers began their effort to talk the bill to death, known formally as a filibuster. He was joined by the three Senate Democrats seeking the party's presidential nomination and Republican Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who objects to the 10-year, \$400 billion price tag.

"I make no apology for obstructing the massive benefits for the insurance industry and the pharmaceutical industry spread through this legislation," said Kennedy, who voted for creation of the Medicare program in 1965.

Gathered for an unusual Sunday session, lawmakers on the Senate floor weighed in yesterday on the 1,000-plus-page document.

"This bill makes it easier for big drug companies to gouge seniors and jack up health care costs so that top executives can make millions," said presidential candidate Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.). He, like other liberal opponents, complained that the legislation does little to curb skyrocketing prescription costs, forces many seniors to spend more on medicine and includes too many sweeteners for the industries likely to receive millions of new customers.

If Frist can overcome the opposition, President Bush intends to sign the bill, which for the first time in Medicare's history would provide some level of outpatient prescription drug coverage for 40 million senior citizens and disabled people. Although the benefits would not start until 2006, both sides expect Bush and other proponents to use a Medicare victory as a central plank in the 2004 campaign.

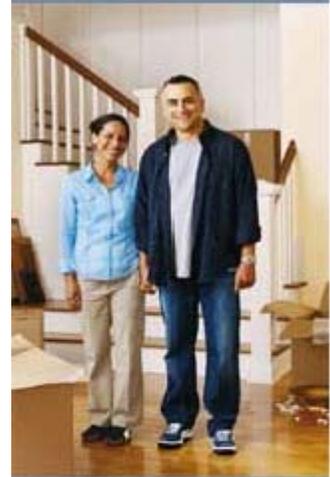
"I don't see how any senator can go home and tell seniors that we're not going to give you a benefit that we promised you five and six years ago," Frist said on CNN's "Late Edition."

In the Senate debate, Finance Committee Chairman Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) said Democrats lost seats in the last election because they opposed a Medicare drug bill, and he predicted they would do so again.

Supporters of the legislation, including the 35 million-member AARP and at least seven Senate Democrats, say it will go a long way in alleviating the strain of rising drug costs. It would also add an element of private-sector competition to the government program, relying on insurance companies or

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pharmacy benefit firms to administer the drug plans.

The bill includes a variety of other changes, including a 1.5 percent rate increase for physicians, millions of dollars for rural hospitals and tax incentives to purchase medical savings accounts. Next April or May, seniors could purchase drug discount cards until the full benefits are implemented.

To highlight the administration's interest, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson spent much of the weekend on Capitol Hill, lobbying lawmakers and holding a news conference yesterday. "This bill is so important to seniors all across America," he said. "We're at the crunch time."

Under the bill, Medicare recipients would have the option of purchasing drug plans for about \$35 a month and, after paying a \$250 deductible, would have 75 percent of their medicine bills covered, up to \$2,250. The upfront costs would be waived for low-income seniors, who would be charged \$1 to \$5 in drug co-payments.

Opponents say the move toward private competition threatens to undermine the fundamental nature of Medicare as a guaranteed health program for every senior citizen.

"I have a moral responsibility to do anything I can to stop it," said Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.), who like the other presidential candidates abandoned the campaign trail to participate in the debate.

"It's not a first step, it's a misstep," said Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.), who also is running for president. "It's very good for the drug companies, it's very good for the HMOs, but it's bad for seniors."

Emotions were running high after an all-night session Friday in the House culminated with an unprecedented three-hour roll call that ended just before dawn Saturday. What looked to be a defeat for Bush suddenly turned around early Saturday when House Republican leaders persuaded two rank-and-file lawmakers to switch from the "no" to the "yes" column, arguing that Democrats would use a parliamentary procedure to bring a more liberal bill to the floor.

Yesterday, Brendan Daly, spokesman for House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), said that was never considered -- or even possible, given Democrats' minority status.

The extended period of cajoling and arm-twisting left bitter feelings: Senate Democrats suggested it was an abuse of House rules, and McCain agreed. "Republicans had better hope that the Democrats never regain the majority," he said on ABC's "This Week."

Thompson acknowledged the legislation is not perfect and committed to a massive public education campaign if it is enacted.

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