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Bush Says He'll Seek to Revive Intelligence Bill House Blocked

By PHILIP SHENON

ASHINGTON, Nov. 21 - President Bush vowed Sunday to work with Congress to revive a bill to enact major recommendations of the Sept. 11 commission, as Republican lawmakers struggled to explain why influential House Republicans blocked the bill's passage despite the president's personal last-minute lobbying.

"When I get home, I look forward to getting it done," Mr. Bush said at a news conference in Santiago, Chile, where he was attending a Pacific Rim economic summit meeting. "I was disappointed that the bill didn't pass. I thought it was going to pass up to the last minute."

Mr. Bush said he and Vice President Dick Cheney had talked "with key members of the House" to encourage support for the bill, which would create the post of national intelligence director to oversee the Central Intelligence Agency and the government's other spy agencies.

"It was clear that I wanted the bill passed," the president said. He declined to respond directly to a question about whether reports of opposition by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld had contributed to the bill's collapse not quite three weeks after Mr. Bush won a second term and his party expanded its control over Congress.

Mr. Bush spoke on a day when Congressional leaders traded accusations and offered new details and interpretations about what doomed the legislation on Capitol Hill on Saturday.

After a month's stalemate, House and Senate negotiators announced that morning that they had finally produced compromise legislation that Congress could vote on before adjourning for the year. But just hours later, J. Dennis Hastert, the House speaker, refused to allow a vote on the measure, bowing to the will of two powerful committee leaders who had been personally lobbied by the president and vice president to allow the bill to go forward.

On Sunday, one of those committee leaders, Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. of Wisconsin, suggested that he was unlikely to compromise further even as Senator Bill

Frist, the majority leader, and other Republican lawmakers held out hope of making progress on the legislation during the traditional Congressional recess in November and December.

In tense hours of discussion on Saturday, a core group of conservative House Republicans continued to warn that the bill would dangerously dilute the authority of the Pentagon on intelligence issues, despite the addition of language drafted by Mr. Cheney's legal counsel that explicitly barred a national intelligence director from interfering in the military chain of command.

Others argued that the bill did not do enough to crack down on illegal immigration, while some lawmakers grumbled about the Senate generally trying to run roughshod over the House.

The bill had been endorsed enthusiastically by leaders of the Sept. 11 commission, whose final report last summer set off a frenzy of action in Congress and the White House to reorganize the intelligence community. If the bill had made it to the House floor, it most likely would have passed despite the objections of many in the Republican ranks. It faced no similar opposition in the Republican-controlled Senate.

Spokesmen for the Pentagon and Mr. Rumsfeld were pointed Sunday in responding to speculation that the defense secretary had played a role in the bill's collapse. Earlier this year Mr. Rumsfeld publicly expressed skepticism about provisions that would require the Pentagon to cede much of its budget and personnel control over intelligence issues to a national intelligence director.

In an interview Sunday, Larry Di Rita, Mr. Rumsfeld's chief spokesman, said: "To place the failure of concluding that very complicated matter on one person is not only wrong, but immensely unfair. The secretary expressed strong support for the president's objectives. These are complicated matters. The fact that it didn't come together should not be blamed on one individual."

In other interviews Sunday, proponents of the compromise bill worked out Friday night by a House-Senate conference committee insisted that the bill did nothing to interfere with the transfer of tactical battlefield intelligence within the Pentagon and that House Republicans and their Pentagon allies seemed more interested in preserving their bureaucratic turf on intelligence issues.

"This idea that somehow the Pentagon would be hurt by this, this is a canard," said Senator Pat Roberts of Kansas, the Republican chairman of the Senate intelligence committee and a member of the conference committee. "I am a former marine, all right?" Mr. Roberts said in an interview on "Fox News Sunday." "No bill that I have ever seen, even the one that I introduced that went even further than this, had anything to do with doing any harm to tactical intelligence in regards to that war fighter in the field."

Whatever the hopes of Republican leaders, Mr. Sensenbrenner, the chairman of the

House Judiciary Committee, said chances for a successful compromise had faded in light of the stinging public criticism of House Republicans by Republicans in the Senate.

"There was no respect for our position," he said, referring to the "condescending attitude of the Senate on the immigration and law enforcement provisions" on which House Republicans had insisted. Those provisions were eventually stricken from the compromise bill reached Friday.

Members of the House-Senate conference committee had been in negotiations since last month to reconcile very different House and Senate bills that were passed in response to the findings of the Sept. 11 commission.

While both bills created the position of national intelligence director, the panel's central recommendation, the bipartisan Senate bill provided the intelligence director with far more sweeping budgetary and personnel powers. The Senate bill was endorsed by the Sept. 11 commission.

The House bill, which was prepared by the House Republican leadership with little input from House Democrats, included a variety of provisions to expand the powers of law enforcement and immigration agencies to deal with terrorist suspects and illegal immigrants.

Negotiations on the conference committee had been reported close to collapse since early in the talks last month. And on Friday, with only a day to go before the House and Senate were to adjourn before Thanksgiving, the collapse appeared final.

Mr. Sensenbrenner and another powerful Republican on the conference committee, Duncan Hunter of California, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, seemed determined to oppose the bill and were believed to be close to persuading other Republican negotiators to join them.

Senate negotiators from both parties and House Democrats said they had given up days earlier on trying to persuade Mr. Hunter, a staunch advocate for the interests of the Pentagon, to go along with the bill, even after they had agreed to add language barring a national intelligence director from interfering in the military chain of command. Lawmakers said the provision had been drafted by David S. Addington, Mr. Cheney's legal counsel.

Mr. Bush intervened to try to rescue the talks about 7 p.m. Friday, when he telephoned Mr. Sensenbrenner from aboard Air Force One, en route to Chile, with a plea that Mr. Sensenbrenner compromise and drop his insistence that the bill contain a provision banning the issuance of driver's licenses to illegal immigrants.

Mr. Sensenbrenner had long championed the idea, which he depicted as a means of blocking terrorists from obtaining official government identification; several of the Sept. 11 hijackers had been issued driver's licenses. But it was opposed by White House

officials and many lawmakers from both parties as unnecessary and an infringement on the rights of state governments.

"What the president was stressing to me was that he would like to get this issue off the table because the Congressional agenda and the presidential agenda were going to be very ambitious" next year, Mr. Sensenbrenner said of Mr. Bush's request for quick passage of an intelligence bill. "I didn't want to give up on the driver's license provision," he said. "But out of respect for him, if he asked me to, I said I would give up on it."

But in dropping the driver's license provision, Mr. Sensenbrenner told the other negotiators that he wanted to reintroduce other law enforcement and immigration provisions, including a measure that would give new discretion to immigration officials in deciding whether to grant political asylum to immigrants. The Senate negotiators and House Democrats said the new provisions, which have been strongly opposed by civil liberties groups, were equally unacceptable.

The chairman of the conference committee, Representative Peter Hoekstra of Michigan, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, decided to take a risk, colleagues said. He would forward the compromise bill - without Mr. Sensenbrenner's provisions and with the almost certain opposition of Mr. Hunter - to the House Republican leadership, urging them to allow a floor vote in the House.

To the delight of the Senate negotiators and House Democrats, Mr. Hastert decided on Saturday to allow a vote, despite the protests of the chairmen of two of the most powerful committees in the House.

Republican lawmakers said that Mr. Hastert had never been a committed advocate of either the bill or of the Sept. 11 commission. But lawmakers said the speaker and his inner circle, who usually exert a tight control on the Republican rank and file, had come to the conclusion that the political risks of not enacting changes called for by the panel were too great in the event of another terrorist attack.

Mr. Hastert's plans came undone when Republicans huddled for a private meeting in a room in the depths of the Capitol around noon on Saturday, where Mr. Hastert sought to sell the bill. He allowed Mr. Hunter to address his colleagues, and it was Mr. Hunter who carried the day by arguing that the bill would undermine American troops in the battlefield by interfering with the military chain of command and the transfer of intelligence.

"Duncan's concern was that the proposed reform could endanger our troops in the field who use real-time intelligence to fight the war in Iraq and Afghanistan," Mr. Hastert said in explaining why he decided to block a final vote and to revive negotiations on the bill. "We must make every precaution to ensure that when we reform our intelligence agencies, we do it in a way that protects our troops and those people who protect our citizens."

Carl Hulse and Sheryl Gay Stolberg contributed reporting for this article.

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