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Bush Reaffirms Support for Intelligence Bill

By PHILIP SHENON

ASHINGTON, Nov. 30 - President Bush affirmed his support Tuesday for a sweeping intelligence-overhaul bill and promised to work with Republican leaders of the House and Senate to push the bill through Congress next week despite the objections of a group of powerful House Republicans who have defied the White House.

"Let's see if I can say it as plainly as I can: I am for the intelligence bill," Mr. Bush said in Ottawa, Canada, after a meeting there with Prime Minister Paul Martin. "I believe the bill is necessary and important and hope we can get it done next week."

His comments came as Vice President Dick Cheney met at the White House with the chairman and vice chairman of the Sept. 11 commission and vowed to continue to press Congress for the bill, which would enact the major recommendations of the commission, including the creation of the job of national intelligence director to oversee the C.I.A. and the government's other spy agencies.

"The vice president reiterated fully that the administration was 100 percent behind the bill and wanted a bill now," said the commission's chairman, Thomas H. Kean, a former Republican governor of New Jersey, after the White House meeting. "He was very explicit."

Mr. Kean said in an interview that he was optimistic that Congress would approve the bill during a brief meeting of lawmakers scheduled for next week, despite the Republican objections in the House. "I have never heard of a bill that had the strong support of the president, the vice president, the speaker of the House, the Senate majority leader, the minority leaders of both houses and a large majority of the American people and that didn't pass," he said.

The intelligence bill, which includes several other provisions intended to force the nation's long-battling intelligence agencies to work together, including establishment of a national counterterrorism center, was derailed this month when Speaker J. Dennis Hastert refused to allow the bipartisan legislation to be brought to a vote despite strong endorsements from the White House and Senate Republicans.

His move followed the announcement by two powerful members of his party -

Representatives Duncan Hunter of California, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. of Wisconsin, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee - that they opposed the bill. Mr. Hunter said that the bill would interfere with the transfer of intelligence to the battlefield, and Mr. Sensenbrenner asserted that important law enforcement provisions that he had championed had been stripped from the legislation.

Their opposition has been politically awkward for the White House, suggesting that only weeks after his election to a second term, Mr. Bush may be unable to enforce discipline among members of his own party in pursuing his agenda on Capitol Hill. The White House has insisted that Mr. Hunter's concerns are misplaced and that the bill would not undermine battlefield intelligence.

Mr. Kean said Tuesday that given Mr. Bush's statements of support for the bill, its defeat would "not be a good early sign for the administration" in its second term. "I think this president, if you think about it, has been very successful when he's gone after something in Congress," he said. "What we want is to join with the president in a full-court press to see if we can get this done."

At the news conference in Ottawa, Mr. Bush noted that he had spoken with the two House Republicans whose opposition blocked the vote, and that he intended to talk with Mr. Hastert and Senator Bill Frist, the majority leader, "before the week is out to express to them why I just told you in public I'm for the bill."

"I want a bill," Mr. Bush said, rejecting a reporter's suggestion that despite its public statements of support, the White House might have been halfhearted in pushing for the legislation. "I have spoken with Duncan Hunter, Representative Hunter, about the bill. I spoke with Representative Sensenbrenner."

There has been no sign of compromise from Mr. Hunter and Mr. Sensenbrenner, and Mr. Hastert has suggested that he would be unwilling to allow a vote if there was substantial opposition from Republican members, even if Democratic votes meant easy passage in the House.

The issue was expected to be raised at a private retreat this weekend near Norfolk, Va., for Republican leaders in Congress, who are debating how to make best use of their expanded numbers in both the House and Senate after the Nov. 2 elections. White House officials were also expected to attend the retreat.

At a news conference in Washington on Tuesday, Mr. Kean and the Sept. 11 commission's vice chairman, Lee H. Hamilton, a former Democratic House member from Indiana, joined with five other members of the commission in trying to step up the pressure on the White House and Congressional Republicans to approve the bill. "Our request to our nation's leaders today is: give us a vote," Mr. Kean said.

Mr. Hamilton, the former chairman of the House Intelligence and International Relations

Committees, rejected charges by Mr. Hunter and others that the bill might undermine troops by interfering with the flow of intelligence; commission members have long argued that a national intelligence director would improve the flow of intelligence to the military by forcing rival spy agencies to coordinate their work to improve battlefield planning.

"It is wartime," Mr. Hamilton said. "We would not support a bill that undercuts support to our troops. The commander in chief supports this bill. The military gets and should get priority for intelligence support. Any time troops are in harm's way, the military goes to the top of the priority list for intelligence collection."

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