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Budget amendment's future in doubt

WASHINGTON (AP) — In an all but fatal blow, Sen. Robert Torricelli announced opposition Wednesday to the Republican-drafted balanced budget amendment to the Constitution.

He said the proposal could hamstring future generations confronting a military crisis, recession or the need for federal construction.

"We write not for our time but for all times," said Torricelli, D-N.J., who has supported similar constitutional amendments in the past. When it comes to making a change in the 210-year-old Constitution, he added, "good is not good enough."

The freshman New Jersey Democrat thus became the 34th Democrat to oppose the measure, enough to ensure its defeat.

Republicans rushed to attack Torricelli for breaking a campaign promise. "He has thumbed his nose at the people of New Jersey once and for all," charged Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott.

At the same time, Torricelli's decision confronted Lott with a choice between offering concessions in hopes of gaining the elusive 67th vote in support of the measure or watching it go down to the narrowest of defeats next week and trying to pin the blame on the Democrats.

The White House issued a statement in which President Clinton said he was pleased with Torricelli's decision. He added it was now "time to get down to the hard work of balancing the budget."

The proposal, a cornerstone of the Republican congressional agenda, would require a balanced budget by 2002, with a three-fifths vote of the House and Senate to run a deficit thereafter. It cleared the House two years ago, when the Republican revolution was in full flower, but fell one vote shy of passage in the Senate.

This time, it bogged down in the House, where some Republicans flinched in the face of Democratic charges that it could threaten Social Security benefits. That prompted the GOP leadership to try to push it through the Senate first.

Republicans argued the measure was needed to instill fiscal discipline in a government that has run deficits for nearly three decades. To dramatize their point, they stacked budget books several feet high on desks in the front row of the Senate, one thick volume for each of the years the budget has been unbalanced.

Within the new Senate, where all 55 Republicans support the measure, it quickly became clear that the swing votes were held by four newly elected Democratic senators.

Two of them, Max Cleland of Georgia and Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, announced their reluctant support over the past several days.

Sen. Tim Johnson of South Dakota declared his opposition last week, even though he, like Torricelli, had supported a similar amendment only two years ago. And shortly after Torricelli's announcement, the Republican National Committee disclosed it would begin airing radio commercials in South Dakota on Thursday saying Johnson "broke his promise."

Torricelli voted for similar amendments twice before, most recently in 1995 in the House when he was preparing for his Senate candidacy. He told reporters that he had done so to get the attention of Presidents Bush and Clinton at a time when deficits were approaching \$300 billion. In the interim, he said, the deficit is closer to \$100 billion, and added, "I could no longer claim that I was using this to make a point."

In morning remarks in the Senate, Torricelli criticized the Republican amendment and proposed changes to make it easier to run a deficit in times of military crisis or recession and to provide for a separate budget for capital construction such as roads, bridges and universities.

He cited World War I and World War II, as well as the Gulf War, as examples of episodes in which critical deficit spending occurred well in advance of a war.

"I do not want any foreign adversary to ever miscalculate (that) because we are unable to reach a three-fifths vote, we will also be unable to defend the United States," he said.

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CHICAGO (AP) — McDonald's is planning a real Big Mac attack, offering the sandwich at its lowest price ever — 55 cents.

The fast-food giant will be taking a loss. The cost of the ingredients alone — two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions and a sesame seed bun — is about 40 cents. But McDonald's hopes to make it up by drawing in more customers and requiring that the Big Mac be sold with a drink and fries.

The Big Mac, introduced in 1972, normally sells for about \$2.

McDonald's will put the "Campaign 55" promotion to a vote today in a closed-circuit telecast to its 2,700 franchisees.

McDonald's recently began cutting prices of some products, including Chicken McNuggets, and offering two Big Macs for \$2. But the new cuts would significantly raise the stakes in the battle to win back customers from Burger King and Wendy's.

Campaign 55 refers to the year McDonald's was founded. The 55-cent package will rotate over the next year from the Big Mac to the Quarter Pounder to the McRib and the Arch Deluxe.

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