

News Digest

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Committee passes Bush's plan to cut taxes

Support of the president's bill divides committee members along party lines.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Racing to do President Bush's bidding, House Republicans pushed across-the-board tax cuts through committee on Thursday, clearing the way for a floor vote next week on the cornerstone of the new economic program.

The vote in the Ways and Means Committee was 23-15, along party lines, as Democrats sharply criticized the bill as flawed and called the unusually quick action by the panel a poor omen for bipartisanship.

"Essentially what the president is proposing is a pay raise for

the average American," said Rep. Jerry Weller of Illinois, one of several Republicans on the panel who argued the bill would stimulate the economy as well as provide relief to taxpayers.

"I do not want to go back to the days of deficit spending. This proposal puts us in that direction," countered Rep. Michael McNulty, D-N.Y. Other Democrats criticized Republicans for going ahead before Congress agrees on an overall plan for spending, debt retirement and tax cuts.

The legislation, estimated to cost \$958 billion in more than a decade, would gradually reduce and condense the current five graduated income tax rates of 15 percent, 28 percent, 31 percent, 36 percent and 39.6 percent. By 2006, rates would be pegged at 10 percent, 15 percent, 25 percent and 33 percent.

Committee Republicans changed Bush's plan slightly to create an interim 12 percent bracket retroactive to Jan. 1, 2001, applied to a taxpayer's first several thousand dollars of income. Republicans said this step was particularly important given the economic slowdown, and officials said it would mean a maximum tax cut this year of \$360 for a couple and \$180 for an individual.

The committee acted less than 48 hours after Bush stepped before a nationwide television audience and a joint session of Congress to urge passage of his tax cut program.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said after the vote the president "is pleased Congress is moving forward on his plan to provide tax relief and he looks forward to their also taking action on paying down the debt and

improving education."

Political fault lines were evident throughout the session.

Republicans banded together to reject a Democratic attempt to make annual tax rate reductions conditional on surpluses materializing.

The committee also rejected a Democratic alternative tax program that is smaller than the GOP plan and aimed at lower and middle income wage taxpayers. It included a new 12 percent tax bracket, but left the other income tax brackets unchanged, reflecting the Democrats' claim that the GOP plan favors the wealthy.

Democratic officials put the cost of their alternative at \$725 billion over the next decade, enough, they said, to maximize debt repayment and leave room for spending on high priority programs.

In all, Bush has proposed \$1.6 trillion in tax cuts for a period of 10 years, including estate tax repeal, increased child care credits and several provisions to encourage charitable giving.

Rep. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, rebutted Democratic arguments that the proposal was tilted in favor of the rich. "The tax code will be more progressive, not less progressive after the president's \$1.6 trillion plan is implemented," he said, because higher income taxpayers will pay a bigger percentage of the nation's total tax bills than is currently the case.

While House approval of the measure is expected, the bill is likely to languish in the Senate for weeks or months.

There, the GOP leadership will need to have a budget in place to overcome any delaying action by Democrats.

World/Nation

The Associated Press

New York

'Puffy' takes the stand to testify in his own defense

NEW YORK — In a sink-or-swim legal strategy, Sean "Puffy" Combs took the witness stand Thursday to declare that he wasn't packing a gun and never offered a \$50,000 bribe the night three people were shot inside a club.

The rap impresari, instead told the jury that he believed the bullets ricocheting through the Club New York on Dec. 27, 1999, were intended for him.

"I thought I was being shot at," said the 31-year-old Combs, dressed in a dark, conservative suit. "My hands were up. ... Everybody started falling all over each other."

Combs' appearance on the stand was the most highly anticipated moment in the case, and the seventh-floor courtroom was packed, mostly with reporters. His former girlfriend, top-selling singer Jennifer Lopez, was not there, but she may be called to testify later.

In making the risky move of testifying in his own defense, Combs could turn the case into his word against that of the prosecution's witnesses.

South Africa

Pipes with traces of drugs found near writer's home

JOHANNESBURG — Several 17th-Century clay pipes found on the site of William Shakespeare's home may have been used to smoke marijuana, scientists reported Thursday.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon in England allowed South African researchers to analyze 24 pipe fragments in Pretoria.

Though marijuana degrades over time, eight of those pipe fragments showed signs suggestive of marijuana, the scientists said. Two of the pipe samples tested also showed evidence of cocaine.

Others showed traces of tobacco, camphor and a chemical with hallucinogenic properties, the study said.

"We do not claim that any of the pipes belonged to Shakespeare himself. However, we do know that some of the pipes come from the area in which he lived, and they date to the 17th Century," said Francis Thackeray of the Transvaal Museum, one of the researchers.

The results of the study are published in the South African Journal of Science.

England

Spread of foot-and-mouth disease causes cancellations

LONDON — It's an animal ailment, but these days, hardly a person living in the British Isles is unaffected by the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease.

In the latest round of cancellations and curtailments meant to stem the spread of the highly contagious livestock virus, organizers on Thursday called off Britain's biggest dog show.

With word that the disease has jumped the Irish Sea, authorities were even thinking about the unthinkable — cancellation of St. Patrick's Day festivities in Dublin.

Since foot-and-mouth disease was discovered at a slaughterhouse in southern England on Feb. 19 — Britain's first outbreak in two decades — the list of banned activities has lengthened daily. No fishing in angling streams, no strolls on country paths, no fox-hunting, no unnecessary farm visits, no horse racing.

Washington, D.C.

Clinton's advisers disagreed with Marc Rich's pardon

Three of former President Clinton's closest advisers told a House committee Thursday they opposed his pardon of Marc Rich and thought it wouldn't happen.

"The staff informed the president that it was our view that the pardon should not be granted," Clinton's White House chief of staff, John Podesta, told the House Government Reform Committee.

The panel's senior Democrat, California Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., asked Podesta, former White House Counsel Beth Nolan and Clinton confidant Bruce Lindsey if there was a "quid pro quo" of donations for the pardons. All three replied no.

Washington recovers from earthquake

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — The damage estimate from the earthquake that rocked the Northwest climbed to \$2 billion on Thursday as engineers inspected bridges, buildings, dams and roads. But the region congratulated itself for escaping far worse damage.

Most people went about their lives as usual, swapping stories about close calls during the most powerful quake to hit Washington state in 52 years.

Few people noticed two minor aftershocks early Thursday, and no additional damage was reported.

State emergency officials counted 272 injuries directly linked to Wednesday's magnitude-6.8 quake, but most were minor and none critical.

"The biggest news is there is no news," Seattle Mayor Paul Schell said. "There aren't any fatalities. The damage, while serious, is not anything like what people would have expected."

The earthquake was centered 35 miles southwest of Seattle and 33 miles underground. Scientists said the depth of the quake eased its impact, while municipal leaders said the millions of dollars spent stabilizing the region's highways and buildings against earthquakes in the past decade paid off.

As inspectors fanned out across the region to check the safety of bridges, dams and roads, most Seattle businesses and schools were open. Four homes were evacuated in a Tacoma neighborhood because of the danger of mudslides.

In Olympia, the state's capital, several streets were blocked off as crews began clearing away rubble and most students in surrounding Thurston County stayed home. The Capitol complex remained closed, idling 10,000 workers, most of them until Monday, when buildings were expected to be inspected and cleaned.



Former Finance Chairwoman for the Democratic National Committee Beth Dozoretz takes the 5th amendment by refusing to testify against herself before the House Governmental Reform Committee on Capitol Hill on Thursday in Washington, D.C. Dozoretz refused to testify to Congress about former President Clinton's controversial pardon of financier Marc Rich.

Racial profiling reconsidered

Attorney General John Ashcroft wants to stop the use of race as a factor in law enforcement.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Declaring "it's wrong," Attorney General John Ashcroft said Thursday he was asking Congress to attack racial profiling — the practice of singling out people for law enforcement based upon their race.

"I believe Congress can, and will, respond constructively," Ashcroft said at a Justice Department news conference, two days after President Bush told Congress he wanted to see this practice stopped.

Ashcroft said that when he was in the Senate, he heard anecdotal evidence of the problem and said, "I have long believed that to treat people solely on the basis of their race was a violation of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution." He called it a tragedy "with real human consequences."

The attorney general said he had discussed this issue with Bush not long after his selection to head the Justice Department and said "the president of the United States elevated this issue into

the consciousness" of Americans.

Ashcroft noted a memo that Bush sent him earlier in the week directing the department to "review the use by federal law enforcement authorities of race as a factor" in their work and "to develop any relevant data" to document the extent of the problem.

"This is as big a problem as you can get," he said. Ashcroft said that a bill introduced in the last Congress by Rep. John Conyers and Sen. Russell Feingold, D-Wis., to collect data from state and local law enforcement agencies would be a good place to start.

The bill would authorize the Justice Department to conduct a study of traffic stop data that is already being voluntarily collected by law enforcement agencies around the country.

Ashcroft said he was moving to fulfill Bush's wishes to "work toward this laudable goal, which each of us should share." He said he hoped that Congress would act within six months to ascertain the extent of the problem on the state and local levels. But he also said that if nothing was forthcoming, "I will simply launch a study of my own."

Ashcroft also said he had ordered aides to immediately undertake a study regarding the extent of the problem at

"I believe that the law enforcement community in the United States is the best law enforcement community in the world."

John Ashcroft
attorney general

the federal level.

"I would hope that we would be able to develop a summary of the types of contacts that exist between federal law enforcement officials and the public," he said, calling it "an important challenge."

"I believe that the law enforcement community in the United States is the best law enforcement community in the world," Ashcroft said. "And I believe they want to do this in a way that's effective and respects the rights of individuals."

Ashcroft whose views on civil rights issues came under sharp examination at his confirmation hearings, has sought early in his tenure to reach out to such groups. He chose for his first civil rights meeting at the Justice Department a sit down with the members of the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay group.

Taliban troops destroy ancient statues

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KABUL, Afghanistan — Defying an international outcry, Taliban soldiers on Thursday began destroying all statues in Afghanistan — even targeting two soaring, ancient statues of Buddha carved into the face of a mountain.

The ruling Islamic militia said they sought to purge the nation of idolatrous images, but their closest ally — Pakistan — said the action could be a backlash against Afghanistan's international isolation, including U.N. sanctions.

Pakistani Interior Minister

Moinuddin Haider told The Associated Press the Taliban's order "may have been an act of defiance brought on by the isolation they feel."

As troops fanned out with rocket launchers and tanks to destroy statues, cultural leaders worldwide expressed horror. The head of UNESCO asked other Islamic nations to pressure the Taliban to stop, while the director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York pleaded with Afghan officials to give the artifacts to foreign museums.

"In Afghanistan, they are destroying statues that the entire world considers to

be masterpieces," UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura said. "This iconoclastic determination shocks me."

"All officials, including the ministry of vice and virtue, have been given the go-ahead to destroy the statues," the Taliban's Information Minister Qadratullah Jamal said Thursday. "The destruction work will be done by any means available to them."

It was impossible to confirm what Taliban troops had destroyed so far — particularly whether they had begun demolishing two huge Buddha statues carved into a cliff at Bamian. One of the statues is 175 feet high and dates to the 5th Century; the other is 120 feet tall and dates to the 3rd century.

The road to Bamian, 90 miles west of Kabul, was blocked by snow Thursday. There are soldiers in Bamian, but journalists have not been allowed to go there. The Taliban also refused to let reporters inside the Kabul Museum, repository for thousands of Buddhist antiquities.

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Weather

TODAY	TOMORROW	SUNDAY
Partly cloudy high 42, low 21	Partly cloudy high 51, low 24	Partly cloudy high 40, low 25