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## For GOP, Urgency On Social Security

### White House Plans Six-Week Push

*By Mike Allen*  
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White House officials are telling Republican lawmakers and allies on K Street that they must begin to overcome opposition to President Bush's proposal for changing Social Security within six weeks, GOP strategists said yesterday.

The GOP strategists stressed that the six-week goal is not a hard deadline for a political breakthrough, but they said the public's tepid view of Social Security change cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely. The directive raises the possibility that Republicans will have to reconsider whether legislation can be passed this year, as Bush wants.

Polls show widespread skepticism of Bush's proposal for creating individual Social Security investment accounts for younger workers, and Democratic lawmakers have voiced nearly uniform opposition. The Washington Post reported over the weekend that some allies of the president are focused on possible split-the-difference deals that would significantly scale back Bush's proposal, yet enable him to claim an incremental victory.

The Treasury Department yesterday announced the formation of a Social Security "war room" and the hiring of three full-time employees to help coordinate and refine the administration's message on the issue. The war room, which the administration is calling the Social Security Information Center, will track lawmakers' remarks to their local news outlets, to help the White House detect signs of Republican concern or Democratic compromise.

The office, modeled after the Coalition Information Centers that promoted the administration message around the world during the war in Afghanistan, will also help target speaking trips by top administration officials.

Party officials said that with Republican lawmakers getting at best a mixed response to the idea in meetings with constituents last week over the Presidents' Day break, the White House believes it is important for lawmakers to hold hearings and conduct high-profile bipartisan meetings that will help build momentum for the plan that has proved so elusive thus far. The stepped-up activities will fall far short of introduction of a detailed plan or bill, since Bush has remained vague about his plan and neither House nor Senate leaders are anywhere near agreeing on a direction.

White House communications director Nicolle Devenish said that the administration is making "great progress" on the issue and that the president has always said people need to understand the problem first.

"Members of both parties have started to acknowledge the nature of the problems facing Social Security, but we've always maintained there's more work to be done in educating the public," Devenish said. "We'll stay focused on making sure that people understand the challenges facing the system before we move on to discussing possible solutions."

### POLITICS TRIVIA

#### Tuesday's Question:

The Senate Judiciary Committee will conduct a confirmation hearing for appellate court nominee William G. Myers III today, and Democrats are expected to attempt to block his nomination. What is currently the longest standing vacancy in the federal judiciary?

- One year
- Three years
- Seven years
- 10 years

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Officials said the information center was planned before Bush's State of the Union address on Feb. 2 and has nothing to do with the reception his plan is receiving from rank-and-file Republican lawmakers. The officials said meetings about the center have been going on for at least two months.

Rob Nichols, the Treasury Department's chief spokesman, said three communicators have been hired for the center and that officials "plan to hire others."

"The president has made it clear that fixing Social Security is his top priority, and this office reflects that commitment," Nichols said.

The center is to be headed by Mark Pfeifle, an administration veteran who has been a spokesman for the Interior Department and last summer's Republican National Convention. Working with him will be Shannon Burkhardt and Jill Willis, both of whom worked on the Bush-Cheney reelection campaign. The three were hired about two weeks ago.

Also yesterday, Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.) issued a report showing changes made to government publications about Social Security that he said were designed to promote Bush's spin.

For instance, he released a copy of a 2000 primer of Social Security that said, "Will Social Security be there for you? Absolutely." A version from last year said: "Social Security must change to meet future challenges." The Social Security Administration said in a statement that Waxman's report is "a gross misrepresentation."

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