



Still, the White House appears sensitive to the complaints. Snow, for instance, called Frist yesterday to discuss the majority leader's statement that it might take a year before the Senate tackles the issue. Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), the third-ranking leader, told colleagues he was frustrated by Frist's comments and called for a detailed plan to be announced this summer. "I respect the majority leader, but I do think the time to fix Social Security is this year," he said. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan yesterday also urged immediate action.

Frist said in response to a question yesterday that he would not take private accounts within Social Security, the heart of Bush's plan but a deal-breaker for many Democrats, "off the table yet." He clarified his position yesterday through spokesman Bob Stevenson, who said it "would be impossible to imagine a successful plan without personal accounts." Stevenson said Frist wants to get Social Security "done this year."

House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.) scheduled his first hearing on "the future of Social Security" for Wednesday. The hearing will not get into solutions but will lay the groundwork that there is a problem, aides said. At a closed-door meeting of Republican members yesterday morning, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (Tex.) told them they need to be more aggressive in promoting Bush's plan. "Our job will take guts and time," he said, according to attendees.

After the meeting, DeLay lashed out at AARP, the seniors group that has led opposition to the Bush plan. "It's incredibly irresponsible of the AARP to be against a solution that hasn't even been written yet and running ads trying to convince people that personal retirement accounts is like going to Las Vegas and playing the lottery," he told reporters. "The Democrats have decided that their whole approach is going to be blame Bush. Well, we've seen how that has worked over the last four years."

One month after launching the Social Security campaign, Bush faces a public that is growing increasingly skeptical of personal accounts and a GOP Congress that remains reluctant, but still willing, to tackle the politically explosive issue.

The more people learn about the Bush plan, the more they oppose it, according to a poll by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. The poll, released yesterday, showed that 46 percent of respondents said they support the accounts, down eight percentage points from December; the number of people who said they are familiar with the president's plan has nearly doubled.

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) was among several who questioned the Bush approach. "The solution should not focus on ownership but on the safety net," he said. "That is where we made a mistake."

Still, Snow and other administration officials who have met with Graham and the six or so Senate Democrats who have not ruled out private accounts said they are confident a deal can be worked out, despite the public posturing.

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