

To Save Welfare Reform, Dole Faces Senate GOP

By Barbara Vobejda and Judith Havemann
Washington Post Staff Writers

A week after he helped finesse a congressional budget compromise and derail a surgeon general nominee, Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) now faces an even greater challenge as he tries to save the GOP welfare reform plan.

This time he is operating alone, and the major sources of contention are within his own party.

Dole and his staff find themselves at the center of hectic negotiations, meeting as often as twice daily, in an attempt to resolve disputes among party members. In the past week he has been beset by Christian conservatives publicly complaining that his top aide is too liberal and by moderate GOP senators demanding that he not cave into hard-liners.

The challenge of passing a welfare bill is heightened for Dole by his dual role as majority leader and as presidential contender.

As majority leader, Dole has to "moderate views and cover over differences," said David Mason, director of the Congress Project for the Heritage Foundation. "As a presidential candidate, he has to paint with bold colors and broad vision."

The political costs to Dole of not passing a welfare bill now concern his supporters.

"Public opinion overwhelmingly demands welfare reform," said Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa), who has endorsed Dole's presidential bid. "And it is viewed as something very easy to do. If the Senate cannot resolve its differences and approve a bill, it will be viewed as a failure of leadership."

But resolving the differences is proving to be enormously difficult, given the divisions among Senate Republicans on two issues: How federal welfare funds will be divided among states and whether the legislation will include restrictions aimed at reducing out-of-wedlock births.

"If the welfare bill does not include provisions stopping the subsidization of illegitimacy I will filibuster," said Sen. Lauch Faircloth (R-N.C.). "Absolutely."

Faircloth said more and more senators are coming around to his way of thinking as they "go back home and hear the American people talk about wanting welfare reform, real reform. They want welfare reduced."

Sen. Phil Gramm (Tex.), a rival of Dole's for the GOP nomination, criticizes the bill almost as harshly as he does some of President Clinton's proposals.

"The Senate bill fails on every major count," Gramm said at a news conference.

The bill voted out of the Senate Finance Committee in May orders states to put half of their welfare recipients to work by the year 2003, but does not require beneficiaries to go to work immediately upon entering the welfare rolls.

Grassley said yesterday he had won support from Republican governors for a compromise that would include the restrictions aimed at reducing out-of-wedlock births in the federal legislation but allow state legislatures to opt out of the restrictions.

In the meantime, a group of Republican moderates in the Senate has positioned itself at the opposite pole, announcing strong opposition to efforts to include the ban on aid to teenage mothers and other provisions demanded by conservatives.

In a letter to Dole, Sen. Nancy Landon Kassebaum (Kan.), Sen. John H. Chafee (R.I.) and five other Republicans argued that including these restrictions would punish children and conflict with the basic concept underlying the bill, which would replace federal welfare payments to individuals with a lump sum grant to states, allowing them maximum flexibility to run their own welfare programs.

Finance Committee Chairman Bob Packwood (R-Ore.) "wisely chose not to include

these provisions in the Finance Committee proposal," the letter said. "We applaud this decision and would strenuously object to their addition."

Welfare reform has acquired a particular intensity for many conservatives, especially in Christian groups, who see it as an opportunity to help shape society's moral values. Just how intense became apparent when several influential interest groups took aim at Sheila Burke, Dole's chief of staff, who has been in charge of efforts to resolve differences among Republicans.

"If the American people like Hillary Clinton, they will love Sheila Burke . . . who over the years has opposed conservative ideals," wrote the Traditional Values Coalition in a news release last week.

"It's more important that reform reflects the philosophy of millions of voters more than one staff member of the Senate," said Gary Bauer, who heads the Family Research Council.

Heritage Foundation scholar Robert Rector complained that Dole's staff has "handled the issue poorly. He campaigned on traditional family values and his staff tramples those values into the dust."

Burke responded that the attack on her was "unfortunate."

The focus of the debate, she said, "ought to be the issues and not the individuals involved."

If the debate over ideological differences has been volatile and rhetorical, the fight over funding formulas has been more like trench warfare.

Led by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.), 30 Sun Belt senators wrote to Packwood while his committee was considering the welfare bill in May, voicing concern that their states would lose out financially. Because their states are experiencing population growth, they said, they could be at a disadvantage under the bill, which freezes funding for five years.

Hutchison said yesterday that she is building "momentum" for her position "as the people in the growth states look at this and realize how important these issues are to them."

She said she believes the dispute will not kill the legislation, but "we all are not going to be made whole. Some of us will have to give in the beginning and some of us will have to give in the end."