

# Abortion Foes Win Senate Vote

## Federal Health Plan Ban on Coverage Moves to Conference

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The Senate gave abortion opponents a dramatic victory yesterday, voting 50 to 44 to ban coverage of abortions in federal employee health plans except in cases of rape, incest or where the mother's life is endangered.

The vote showed the renewed power of antiabortion forces in the Republican-controlled Congress. The House overwhelmingly approved a stricter abortion ban in July, and the differences between the two bills will have to be worked out in conference.

In a separate action, senators voted to deny automatic cost-of-living increases to all members of Congress to demonstrate their commitment to balancing the budget.

The Senate dodged one veto threat by restoring funds for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, which it earlier had threatened to eliminate. The provisions are part of a \$23 billion appropriations bill to finance the Treasury Department, White House and small agencies for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1. Clinton had threatened to veto the entire measure if Congress had wiped out the drug office.

The unusual Saturday session, attended by 94 of the 100 senators, was dominated by nearly six hours of heated debate over abortion. It was the first showdown over the emotional issue since the Republicans gained control of the Senate in last November's elections.

The Senate voted to reinstate abortion restrictions on federal insurance coverage that were in effect between 1984 and 1993, but dropped after Clinton took office.

The restrictions affect the 9 million Americans who receive their health coverage under the Federal Employees Health Benefits Plan, which has been suggested as a possible model for revamping Medicaid and Medicare.

The abortion issue seesawed throughout the day as supporters of abortion rights first beat back a House-passed abortion ban that would permit federal insurance to cover only abortions necessary to save the mother's life.

But the addition of language to allow abortions in the case of rape or incest broadened support for the bill,

See SENATE, A9, Col. 3

### SENATE, From A1

which won the votes of 40 Republicans and 10 Democrats.

Sen. Don Nickels (R-Okla.), the Republicans' floor leader on the issue, said "there is nothing in the Constitution that says the taxpayers have to pay for abortions. . . . We don't want to make this too easy, to destroy a human life and be out in an hour. . . . This is not . . . a tooth extraction."

Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), speaking for the Democrats, said, "It is inconceivable to me to deny women who work for the government the right to choose a health care plan that covers a full range of reproductive health services."

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) called the ban on coverage a "frontal attack, a virtual meltdown" of women's rights.

The abortion debate engaged six of the Senate's eight women members, who described it as an issue of constitutional rights and fairness and punctuated their comments with personal references. Mikulski pointedly thanked the "good men" of the Senate who voted to make abortions more widely available.

Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) said her college roommate had become pregnant as a result of date rape and had a back alley abortion that left her permanently unable to have children.

But Sen. Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) recounted the most chilling personal story as he argued for allowing the government health plans to cover abortions resulting from cases of rape or incest.

"My wife was attacked eight blocks from where we are," he said as his voice quavered. "It was a vicious rapist, . . . she had a gun to her head, and he tried to get her into a car. . . . She was able to evade him."

If she had become pregnant, "it would be vicious and monstrous to say she had to carry that baby to term," he said before quickly leaving the chamber.

The emotional nature of the debate caught up both sides.

Sen. Robert D. Smith (R-N.H.) called abortion "one of the great issues of the day, much as slavery was 100 years ago."

Only 2 percent of abortions, he

said, were performed for "clinically identifiable reasons, and 98 percent for lifestyle reasons." He challenged Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.), the floor leader of the appropriations bill, to identify at what point his own life began, if not at conception.

Kerrey said such determinations were in the realm of faith and prayer, matters between a woman and God.

"It may surprise the senator from

New Hampshire that he is not my God," Kerrey said.

Smith expressed "deep resentment" over the statement and demanded an apology, which was not forthcoming.

Mikulski's proposal to have federal insurance cover abortions deemed medically necessary failed, 49 to 45.

The Treasury bill passed yesterday is the fourth of 13 regular appropriations bills to clear the Senate. The House passed 11 of the 13 appropriations bills before recessing Friday until Sept. 6.

The debate over abortion on the relatively noncontroversial Treasury appropriations bill—and the threat Friday night by Senate Democrats to offer dozens of amendments to a military spending bill—signaled a long week ahead as Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) introduced his welfare reform bill shortly before the Senate adjourned yesterday until Monday.

Dole's welfare plan would turn welfare over to the states in the form of a block grant or lump sum payment. Half of all recipients would be required to work by the year 2000, benefits would be limited to a maximum of five years, and states would have broad authority to deny benefits to teenage mothers or women who have additional children while receiving welfare.

"There is a true national consensus to transform welfare from a program

that doesn't work into one that does," said Dole, who is the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination. "It is my intention that once the Senate begins to talk about welfare reform, we will continue until we actually have done something about it."

The Senate is scheduled to meet through next week, but Dole threatened Friday night to extend the session if progress is not made.

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