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Despite debate, Senate expected to easily approve Homeland Security secretary

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WASHINGTON -- Senators predicted Michael Chertoff would be easily approved as the nation's next Homeland Security secretary even as they jostled Monday over whether he had any connection to a secret FBI memo that discussed the treatment of terror suspects.

The Senate opened six hours of debate leading up to Tuesday's 4 p.m. vote to confirm Chertoff. The vote was delayed for a week as Democratic senators hammered the Justice Department for refusing to release an unedited copy of a May 2004 e-mail from FBI agents seeking guidance about questioning terror suspects held at Guantanamo Bay.

Chertoff, now a federal appeals court judge, headed the Justice Department's criminal division during the government investigation immediately following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. He was federal prosecutor in New Jersey from 1990 to 1994.

Monday's debate was led by Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., who said he plans to support Chertoff even though "information relevant to his confirmation has been arbitrarily denied to the Senate."

Chertoff told lawmakers earlier this month he had no knowledge of the contents of the FBI memo, or who sent it. Chertoff also denied approving any harsh interrogation techniques that violate anti-torture laws.

Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee chairwoman Susan Collins said the memo is irrelevant to Chertoff's nomination and urged lawmakers to take his assurances at face value.

"Have we become so cynical about the good people who are making extraordinary sacrifices to serve their country?" said Collins, R-Maine. "If this is what the confirmation process is becoming all about, then I fear that very good people are going to say no. They're going to say, 'It is not worth having my honesty questioned.'"

Levin said his demand for the FBI memo was to merely assure congressional oversight _ and was not meant to challenge Chertoff's integrity.

"That is simply carrying out a responsibility that this Senate has to be fully informed as to the facts that relate to a nominee," Levin said. "It's that simple. It's that important."

Two other Democrats _ Sens. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and Bill Nelson of Florida _ said they also planned to vote for Chertoff.