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Senate Plans to Confirm Gonzales

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WASHINGTON - Despite Democratic complaints that White House counsel Alberto Gonzales helped craft questionable U.S. policies on the treatment of foreign prisoners, the Senate plans to confirm him as the nation's first Hispanic attorney general.

Gonzales, a longtime friend of President Bush who worked for him in Texas, is expected to be confirmed by a healthy margin Thursday as the nation's top law officer. While as many as 30 Democrats could vote against Gonzales, opponents said they would not tie up the nomination with a delaying filibuster.

"This is a breakthrough of incredible magnitude for Hispanic-Americans," said Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., calling Gonzales "a role model for the next generation" of Hispanics in this country.

Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., said he expected Gonzales, a former Texas judge, "to help lead the way for the creation of an America that despises hate and bigotry and recognizes that every human being deserves a government that will fight for the dignity and equality of all."

But other Democrats said Gonzales shouldn't be confirmed because they say he was evasive with his answers to their questions about White House policies in the war on terror.

"He was so circumspect in his answers, so unwilling to leave a micron of space between his views and the president's, that I now have real doubts whether he can perform the job of attorney general," said Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

"In short, Judge Gonzales still seems to see himself as counsel to the president, not attorney general, the chief law enforcement officer of the land," continued Schumer.

Senate Democrats have used the nomination - as they did with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice - to criticize the Iraq war and the treatment of foreign prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"I simply cannot support the nomination of someone who, despite his assertions to the contrary, obviously contributed in large measure to the atrocious policy failures and the contrived and abominable legal decisions that have flowed from this White House over the past four years," said Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., and the Senate's senior senator.

During his confirmation hearing, some Democrats charged that Gonzales' January 2002 memo as White House counsel led to the abuse of suspected terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan. The memo argued that the fight against terrorism "renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions."

Pressed by senators on the issue, Gonzales defended the memo and that the treaty's protections did not extend to al-Qaida and other suspected terrorists, but declared, "Torture and abuse will not be tolerated by this administration."

He told senators that as attorney general he would "ensure the Department of Justice aggressively pursues those responsible for such abhorrent actions."

Salazar said Gonzales made his position torture clear. "Torture is illegal and wrong and that will be the position of Judge Gonzales as attorney general," said Salazar.

Democrats also have peppered Homeland Security secretary nominee Michael Chertoff on whether he had a role in approving interrogation methods used on terror suspects while he served as a top Justice Department prosecutor. Chertoff, now a federal appeals court judge in Newark, N.J., maintained he gave the CIA only broad guidance and never addressed the legality of any specific interrogation technique.

Chertoff also is expected to be easily confirmed, probably next week. Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., who posed the toughest questions to Chertoff during his confirmation hearing, said he knew of no senator who planned to oppose him.