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Senate to Begin Debate on Rice Nomination

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WASHINGTON - In a daylong debate, Democratic senators are using President Bush's nomination of Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state to rake his Iraq war policy over the coals.

Rice's confirmation as Colin Powell's replacement appears not to be in doubt. Still, Sens. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia and Barbara Boxer of California and eight other Democrats are lined up to get their licks in Tuesday, even though many of them may wind up in Rice's column when the vote is taken.

Republicans, by contrast, are expected to rally behind Rice - and President Bush - with briefer speeches. Nine hours have been set aside for the debate, divided equally between the two parties.

Byrd and Boxer, opponents of the war from the outset, have one-hour speeches scheduled. They consider the war a mistake and Bush's postwar strategy inadequate as determined insurgents take a rising toll of American casualties.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., also scheduled to speak, issued a statement Monday criticizing Rice as being involved in "the shameful decision by the administration to authorize the torture of detainees in Guantanamo and Iraq."

On Wednesday, a brief series of statements by senators is expected, setting up the vote to put Rice in charge of U.S. diplomacy.

"We are talking about the safety and security of this country, so I very much and very quickly want to move with Secretary Rice," Senate Republican leader Bill Frist of Tennessee said Tuesday. Frist said he was disappointed by the delay and was confident the Senate would confirm her on Wednesday.

The White House had been confident that Rice would be approved last week, and State Department officials were alerted to show up Friday morning to greet her with smiles and applause.

But Democratic critics insisted on an opportunity to air their views on the Senate floor.

On the Republican side, Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, which recommended confirmation last week with a 16-2 vote, was scheduled to speak and to summon other Republican senators make speeches in Rice's behalf.

The Republican statements probably will be briefer than those of the Democrats and may not consume the 4 1/2 hours allotted to the GOP side.

Last week, White House chief of staff Andrew Card said the Democrats' decision to have a day or more of debate on the nomination amounted to "petty politics."

"She certainly is qualified and ready to be the secretary of state," Card said. "We're anxious to have her there, and there's not a doubt in my mind that she will be confirmed, and she should be confirmed quickly."

In the meantime, Secretary Powell, who gave his a farewell speech at the State Department on Wednesday, remains on the job.

Powell has shuttled between his home in McLean, Va., and his seventh-floor office while Undersecretary Marc Grossman, who also has submitted his resignation, takes care of day-to-day matters.

Powell represented the United States at Sunday's inauguration in Kiev, Ukraine, of that former Soviet republic's Western-leaning president, Viktor Yushchenko.

During two days of sometimes testy hearings last week, Rice acknowledged some bad decisions on Iraq by the Bush administration and that desertions and poor leadership within Iraqi security forces were hampering the country's defense.

At the same time, she bristled at accusations by Boxer that she had constantly shifted ground on why it was right to invade Iraq to depose President Saddam Hussein.

As Bush's national security adviser, Rice channeled intelligence to the president, including the assertion, which proved in error, that Saddam had hidden arsenals of chemical and biological weapons.

Also, her contention that Iraq was trying to develop nuclear weapons has become debatable.

"Condoleezza Rice may have been in the chair, but some may have seen President George Bush sitting there, so there was a face-to-face confrontation, some important questions," Lugar said Sunday on CNN's "Late Edition."

Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada denied Republican suggestions that Democrats were playing politics with Rice's nomination.

Rice is a chief architect of Bush administration policies in Iraq and in the overall fight against terrorism, and her record has to be reviewed with care, Reid and Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Del., said in a statement Friday.