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Republicans Join Vote to Override Water Bill Veto

By [CARL HULSE](#)

WASHINGTON, Nov. 6 — Congressional Democrats escalated a confrontation with President Bush over federal spending on Tuesday as the House overrode Mr. Bush's veto of a popular water projects measure and approved a \$215 billion bill to pay for health, education, labor and veterans programs despite a veto threat.

The vote on the water measure was 361 to 54, far more than needed to reject the veto. If the Senate follows suit, it will be the first time Mr. Bush has had a veto overturned.

After a long night of skirmishing on the House floor, 222 Democrats were joined by 47 Republicans in finally approving the \$215 billion spending bill. Voting against the measure were 142 Republicans.

With an eye to the 2008 elections, Mr. Bush and Congressional Republicans are trying to re-establish the party's faded reputation for fiscal responsibility, while Democrats are working to portray Republicans as being out of touch with the priorities of ordinary Americans.

Mr. Bush has threatened to reject several of the already overdue spending bills, and the [Office of Management and Budget](#) on Tuesday renewed its opposition to the health and veterans package, saying it included an "irresponsible and excessive level of spending" and improperly tied disputed domestic dollars for health, education and labor initiatives to veterans money.

But Democrats said it was Mr. Bush and his Republican allies who were acting irresponsibly by resisting slight increases to pay for improvements in health care and education while simultaneously seeking nearly \$200 billion in new deficit spending this year to pay for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"If the president wants to talk about priorities, let's talk about what is really important to the American people," said Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), Democrat of California. "I'd rather have a war on cancer than fritter away many more dollars in Iraq."

The amount in dispute is a relatively modest level of federal money — \$22 billion out of almost \$1 trillion in overall discretionary spending, spread across 12 bills. But both sides say the numbers obscure larger issues, such as the recent Republican record on spending matters, the Congressional appetite for pet projects known as earmarks and the coming battle for control of Congress.

Mr. Bush and Republican leaders are taking a harder line on spending out of a belief that voters in 2006 punished them for allowing federal spending to creep upward in the last six years and creating a costly new [Medicare](#) drug benefit. But not all Republicans are toeing that line. On the veto override on Tuesday, 138 Republicans joined 223 Democrats in easily overcoming the president's objections, and all of the annual spending bills have had solid bipartisan support.

Money for every federal agency is at risk if Mr. Bush and Congress cannot come to terms in the coming weeks. The end result in the worst case could be a shutdown of government services — an outcome both the administration and Congressional leaders say they are eager to avoid.

The government is operating under a stopgap measure that expires Nov. 16. But lawmakers would extend that deadline through Dec. 14 as part of a Pentagon spending measure making its way to the floor.

Democrats say the president's unwillingness to yield on spending increases is creating a needless confrontation, a showdown that Representative David R. Obey, the Wisconsin Democrat who is chairman of the Appropriations Committee, this week called a "manufactured crisis." Others agree.

"The president is appealing to a very small conservative base of people, his last few friends in the country, to say, 'I am conservative,'" said Senator [Patty Murray](#) of Washington, a Democrat involved in mapping the party's spending strategy. "But the problem is, he is playing with American lives while he sends his message to his friends."

In increasingly caustic terms, Mr. Bush has assailed Democratic leaders for their push for more money and as being too slow in getting the required spending bills to the White House.

"Considering how eager they are to spend your money, it's shocking it's taken so long to do so," Mr. Bush told grocery goods manufacturers last week.

Democrats have struggled for weeks to fashion a consensus strategy for confronting the president on the spending legislation, and the House and Senate have been at odds over how to proceed. "There is a lot of confusion up there," said [Jim Nussle](#), director of the Office of Management and Budget. "We are not sure how to deal with them."

As a first step, Democrats this week chose to combine the nearly \$151 billion measure that pays for a wide variety of health and labor programs — and which the president has threatened to veto — with a popular \$64 billion veterans measure the president has said he will sign even though it exceeds his limit by \$4 billion.

The health bill exceeds the president's spending allotment by about \$10 billion — almost half of the amount at issue. But some of those increases are designated for highly popular initiatives like [National Institutes of Health](#) research and federally financed community health centers. Those

centers, in line for an added \$225 million for new and expanded facilities, have been hailed for delivering economical care to the nation's uninsured, with Mr. Bush calling them a "really good use of taxpayers' money."

Republicans have objected to merging the health and veterans bills and Senate Republicans said Tuesday that they would use a procedural tool to try to force Democrats to send Mr. Bush the health bill on its own.

"There is no reason to put the veterans and our active-duty military and all of their needs that would be met immediately into a bill that has nothing to do with this issue and which the president has given the signal he is going to veto," said Senator [Kay Bailey Hutchison](#), Republican of Texas.

Other Republicans say a focus on the overall \$22 billion divide is misleading, because the increases, when extended over five years, would amount to \$204 billion. "That throws off the effort to balance the budget and puts pressure on the need to raise taxes," said Representative Paul D. Ryan, Republican of Wisconsin. Republicans also intend to highlight earmarks to show the bills contain wasteful spending. Democrats say that Republicans spearheaded the expansion of earmarks when they controlled Congress and that such projects are sought by both sides. They point to a Congressional Research Service report that shows the Republican-led Congress regularly exceeded administration's spending limits when emergency and war money was factored in and that the president never balked. They also said Republicans routinely merged spending bills when they were in charge.

"This is not a unique procedure, notwithstanding some of the hand-wringing you will hear," said Representative [Steny H. Hoyer](#) of Maryland, the Democratic majority leader.

Republicans defended their push to override the public works bill, saying that the water projects had been stalled for years and that each would require another vote before the money was actually spent.

But some of their colleagues warned they were acting at their political peril. "The American people long for a Congress and a national government that will embrace fiscal discipline and reform," said Representative Mike Pence, Republican of Indiana.

David Herszenhorn contributed reporting.

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