

Rights backers get posts in Congress

By Hazel Trice Edney
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Nothing illustrates the shift in political power in Congress more dramatically than this: Under Republican control, all key committee chairpersons earned an F on the NAACP Report Card. All of the key incoming Democratic chairs in the House and Senate earned A's or B's under the latest grading system.

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mine which issues come before their committee before they go to the floor of the House or the Senate to be voted on. This means that in many cases, now we also have chairs who are original co-sponsors of legislative priorities for the African-American community and the NAACP," said Hilary O. Shelton, director of the NAACP Washington Bureau.

"When you really look at what it means to have people who have a proven track record of supporting our agenda, regardless of their

race, they supported us 100 percent and 97 percent of the time."

Among the most powerful House committees with oversight over important issues are the Judiciary, Ways and Means, and Homeland Security. They are all headed by African-Americans: John Conyers of Michigan, Charles Rangel of New York and Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, respectively. With all A's on the NAACP report card, they have replaced Republicans James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin,



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William Thomas of California and Peter King of New York, all of whom had F's.

In the Senate, the Judi-

ciary, Finance and Homeland Security committees are now headed by Democrats Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont and Max Baucus of Montana and Democrat-turned-Independent Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, respectively. All three received B's on the report card. They replaced Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Susan Collins of Maine, who got all F's.

Political analysts are asking: What does all of this mean?

Although voters sent a clear message last November that they do not support keeping U.S. troops in Iraq, Democrats are gingerly tiptoeing around the issue of cutting off funding for the war. And not everyone is happy about that reluctance.

"This is about the lives of men and women. And Democrats have to go beyond being Democrats and think like world citizens. And any world citizen would say we need to change the course," said Clifford Alexander, who 30 years ago became the first Black secretary of the army in the Carter Administration.

"The Democrats are not the commanders-in-chief. But they certainly can say and should say in as much unison as possible, 'We need to get out right now.'"

Even if withdrawal from Iraq is not imminent, Shelton says the change in leadership opens a chance for Democrats to deal with critical issues of the Black community, such as anti-racial profiling, anti-police brutality, anti-hate crimes, and legislation to address failures in mandatory minimum sentences; the re-enfranchisement of felony offenders, and school construction.

Important domestic issues, including minimum wage, are on the front burner for the first 100 days of Congress. But Democrats — with one eye on the White House in 2008 — appear fearful that Americans will think they are undermining the com-

mander-in-chief if they take strong legislative stances on the war, says Alexander.

"Here's what they can do. They can hold very quick hearings on appropriations and they can say very clearly, 'There will be no money appropriated for new people going to Iraq.' Some of the Republicans will say, 'That's unpatriotic. You're hurting our soldiers,'" Alexander observed.

"Then, at least the opposition party can be very clear that they are going to have any and everything to do with blocking any new policies that put American men and women in harm's way or any policies that do not reel people out of Iraq as quickly as possible. Then they should give him a certain amount of time to give a plan of reduction of people and you will only fund enough for that reduction and for maintaining the safety of that."

President Bush was expected to announce a new strategy for Iraq this week, including the possible deployment of at least 20,000 more troops.

"The Democrats say they are against the war and they keep voting for the budget. You've got to cut the budget and redirect the money," said Jesse Jackson Sr.

"Many Democrats will continue saying they are against the war because it's popular, but keep funding it in the name of protecting the soldiers. You protect the soldiers by bringing them home, not by sending them more death warrants. Sending more to Iraq will be nothing but a death warrant."

After taking the oath of office last week, new Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) had a polite phone conversation with the president. They said they were looking forward to working together.

In public comments, Pelosi said, "It is the responsibility of the president to articulate a new plan for Iraq that makes it clear to the Iraqis that they must defend their own streets and their own security, a plan that promotes stability in the region and a plan that allows us to responsibly re-deploy our troops."

Far less restrained than Pelosi, new Congressional Black Caucus Chairwoman Carolyn Cheeks-Kilpatrick (D-Mich.), a member of the Appropriations Committee, (See Congress, Page 13)

Flood insurance program tiff

WASHINGTON (AP) - The federal flood insurance program may be going broke after incurring \$20 billion in debt from recent storms like Hurricane Katrina. Still, politicians want to extend the taxpayer-subsidized coverage for some of the riskiest — and potentially most valuable — properties in the country.

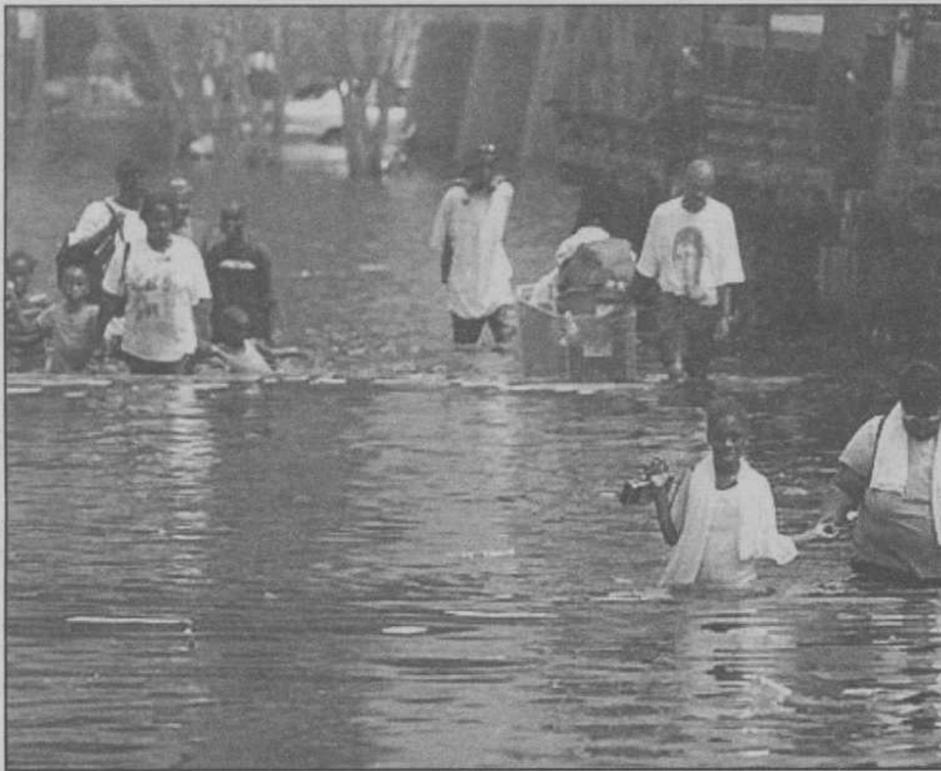
For all it didn't accomplish this year, Congress passed two bills carving out exceptions to a law passed years ago to phase out federal spending that might encourage development in environmentally sensitive and disaster-prone areas.

One of the bills benefited Jekyll Island, a vacation spot off Georgia's coast that is poised for redevelopment, while the other helped a mostly undeveloped 10-lot subdivision on Florida's Gulf Coast.

A handful of similar proposals are pending. After seeing the success of the Georgia and Florida bills this year, property owners in Alabama, Texas and elsewhere are lobbying for their own continued coverage.

"You only have to look at 300 miles of Katrina and Rita wasteland to see that bankrolling federal flood insurance in high-risk areas is just asking the American taxpayer to flush money down the toilet," said Oliver Houck, director of the environmental law program at Tulane University in New Orleans. "If people want to build out there, that's one thing. But to build out there with federal support is insane."

The debate involves a Reagan-era environmental law called the Coastal Barrier Resources Act that was hailed as a free-market ap-



Victims of Hurricane Katrina's tremendous deluge wade in dirty water in New Orleans.

proach to conservation.

Instead of restricting where private landowners could build, the law, nicknamed COBRA, mandated that the government would not subsidize such construction, whether through flood insurance, roads or otherwise.

However, Congress has repeatedly chipped away at the covered territory, often in response to wealthy property owners who argue they were mistakenly included. Lawmakers have redrawn COBRA maps more than 40 times in the past 15 years, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which oversees the maps.

At least four other bills stalled this year, and Fish and Wildlife officials say they have received more than 20 other requests for changes.

Even critics concede that mapping corrections are sometimes warranted and that the two exemptions approved this year are hardly a

blip in the federal flood portfolio, which carries 5.4 million policies and recently eclipsed \$1 trillion in coverage.

But they say Congress' continued willingness to extend coverage is alarming, particularly in the hindsight of Katrina.

"The underlying principle is that every time COBRA runs up against individual interests, it's always COBRA that loses," said Steve Ellis, vice president of the watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense. "These are clearly areas where there's a lot of development pressure and COBRA's having an impact in denying that."

Despite anecdotes that private flood insurance is unavailable, industry officials say it is for sale, just without the government subsidies.

It's those subsidies that have put the federal system in need of a taxpayer bailout. The program owes the Treasury \$20 billion. It takes in

just \$2 billion a year in premiums. More than a third of that — nearly \$720 million a year — is now eaten up by interest on the debt.

Congress has wrestled with reforming the system by raising premiums and placing new requirements on homeowners. But lawmakers adjourned the session again without acting.

Instead, in the two COBRA bills that were passed, they added hundreds of high-risk properties and paved the way for new construction on vulnerable land.

Six of the 10 lots exempted in the Grayton Beach, Fla., bill are vacant, owned by out-of-state investors. About two-thirds of the 600-plus houses on Jekyll Island are vacation homes, and state officials are reviewing sweeping proposals for new construction on the island.

In both cases, owners insist their properties were (See Insurance, Page 15)