

Senate Overrides Trump's Veto of Defense Bill, Dealing a Legislative Blow

Republicans joined Democrats to deliver President Trump the first veto override of his presidency in the last days of his term in an overwhelming, bipartisan vote.



By Catie Edmondson

Jan. 1, 2021

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Friday voted overwhelmingly to override President Trump's veto of the annual military policy bill as most Republicans joined Democrats to rebuke Mr. Trump in the final days of his presidency.

The 81-to-13 vote was the first time lawmakers have overridden one of Mr. Trump's vetoes. It reflected the sweeping popularity of a measure that authorized a pay raise for the nation's military.

The margin surpassed the two-thirds majority needed to force enactment of the bill over Mr. Trump's objections, and only seven Republicans voted to sustain the veto. The House passed the legislation on Monday in a similarly lopsided 322-to-87 vote that also mustered the two-thirds majority required.

The vote ended a devastating legislative week for Mr. Trump, effectively denying him two of the last demands of his presidency. Senate Republican leaders on Wednesday had declared that there was "no realistic path" for a vote on increasing stimulus checks to \$2,000 from the current \$600, a measure Mr. Trump had pressed lawmakers to take up.

Republicans have also divided over supporting the president's determination to make one last and futile attempt to overturn the 2020 election results in Congress next week.

Senator James M. Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma and the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, typically a strong ally of the president, took to the Senate floor on Friday to encourage his colleagues to override Mr. Trump's veto, calling the passage of the bill "the most significant vote lawmakers take."

"This year especially so, in light of all of the disruptions and problems that we've had," Mr. Inhofe said.

The main disruption Mr. Inhofe was referring to was the president. Making good on a monthslong series of threats, the president vetoed the bipartisan legislation last week, citing a shifting list of reasons, including his objection to a provision directing the military to strip the names of Confederate leaders from bases. He also demanded that the bill include the repeal of what is known as Section 230, a legal shield for social media companies that he has tangled with. Republicans and Democrats alike have said that the repeal, a significant legislative change, is irrelevant to a bill that dictates military policy.

Mr. Trump took to Twitter on Friday shortly after the vote to register his anger at Republican lawmakers' unwillingness to meet his demands.

"Our Republican Senate just missed the opportunity to get rid of Section 230, which gives unlimited power to Big Tech companies. Pathetic!!!" Mr. Trump wrote. "Now they want to give people ravaged by the China Virus \$600, rather than the \$2000 which they so desperately need. Not fair, or smart!"

Sign Up for On Politics A guide to the political news cycle, cutting through the spin and delivering clarity from the chaos. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Those objections, registered late in the legislative process, infuriated lawmakers, who had labored for months to put together a bipartisan bill. They had prided themselves on passing the military bill each year for 60 years, and lawmakers in Mr. Trump's own party ultimately moved to mow over his concerns and advance the legislation. It was a sharp departure from the deference Mr. Trump has normally been shown on Capitol Hill by members of his party.

The vote on Friday ensures that the legislation will be enacted into law over Mr. Trump's objections, including the provision requiring the Pentagon to strip the names of Confederates from military bases that so riled the president. The bill also takes steps to slow or block Mr. Trump's planned drawdown of American troops from Germany and Afghanistan, and would make it more

difficult for the president to deploy military personnel to the southern border.

All of the Republican conference leaders voted to override the veto on Friday, including Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader. He called the legislation “a tremendous opportunity to direct our national security priorities to reflect the resolve of the American people.”



Senator Bernie Sanders called for votes on the House-passed bill authorizing larger stimulus payments and a separate measure that lumped together three of President Trump's demands. Stefani Reynolds for The New York Times

Just seven Republicans voted to sustain the veto, including Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, a longtime defense hawk who criticized the legislation as the product of a rushed and faulty process that failed to satisfy Mr. Trump's demand to repeal the legal protections for social media companies.

“Some seem to have forgotten to consult with the commander in chief or recall that he has a veto power,” Mr. Cotton said last month in a speech on the Senate floor. “The bill stiff-arms the president: not a word in more than 4,500 pages about Section 230.”

Lawmakers over the past four years tried but failed to override Mr. Trump's vetoes of legislation cutting off arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf nations, and to overturn his emergency declaration at the southwestern border.

But his attempt to derail the widely popular defense bill, seen by lawmakers in both parties as an opportunity to secure wins for their communities and support the military, proved to be a bridge too far. That was especially the case for those in his party who proudly championed their commitment to national security and have grown weary of the president's mercurial demands.

Senator Bernie Sanders, independent of Vermont, tried on Friday to take up Mr. Trump's demand to increase the size of pandemic relief checks to \$2,000. He called for votes on both a House-passed bill authorizing larger checks and a separate measure by Mr. McConnell that lumped together three of Mr. Trump's demands: the larger payments, a repeal of legal protections for social media platforms and the creation of a bipartisan panel to investigate the integrity of the 2020 election.

Senator John Thune of South Dakota, the No. 2 Republican, blocked the request, underscoring the scant appetite in the party for increasing the size of the checks. The chamber then moved on to override Mr. Trump's veto on the defense bill.

The bill contains a 3 percent increase in pay for service members and a boost in hazardous duty incentive pay, new benefits for tens of thousands of Vietnam-era veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange and a landmark provision aimed at preventing the use of shell companies to evade anti-money-laundering rules.

The last time Congress overrode a presidential veto was in 2016, the final year of Barack Obama's presidency, after he vetoed legislation allowing families of the victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to sue the government of Saudi Arabia.