

Senate Sends Military Bill to Trump's Desk, Spurning His Veto Threat

The move raised the prospect of a legislative showdown in the president's final weeks in office on the bill that authorizes pay for the troops.



By Catie Edmondson

Dec. 11, 2020

WASHINGTON — The Senate overwhelmingly passed a sweeping military policy bill on Friday that would require that Confederate names be stripped from American military bases, clearing the measure for enactment and sending it to President Trump's desk in defiance of his threats of a veto.

The 84-13 vote to approve the legislation reflected broad bipartisan support for the measure that authorizes pay for American troops and was intended to signal to Mr. Trump that lawmakers, including many Republicans, were determined to pass the critical bill even if it meant potentially delivering the first veto override of his presidency.

The margin surpassed the two-thirds majority needed in both houses to force enactment of the bill over Mr. Trump's objections. The House also met that threshold in passing the measure on Tuesday, raising the prospect of a potential veto showdown during Mr. Trump's final weeks in office.

The scene that played out on the Senate floor on Friday underscored how Republicans, who have been reluctant to challenge the president on any other issue during his four years in office, have been extraordinarily willing to break with Mr. Trump over one of the party's key orthodoxies — projecting military strength.

"I encourage all of us to do what we have to do to get this bill done," Senator James M. Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma and the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, told his colleagues in a speech from the floor. "There's no one more deserving in America than our troops that are out there in harm's way, and we're going to make sure we do the right thing for them."

Thirteen senators, split evenly among party lines, voted against the bill, with Republicans supporting Mr. Trump's objections and Democrats chafing at the bill's topline number. Three senators, Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, Mike Rounds, Republican of South Dakota, and Kamala Harris, Democrat of California and the vice president-elect, did not vote.

Congress has succeeded in passing the military bill each year for 60 years. But Mr. Trump has threatened to upend that tradition, pledging since the summer to veto the legislation even as leaders in his own party privately implored him to support it.

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Mr. Trump first objected to a provision supported overwhelmingly by lawmakers in both parties in both chambers that would strip the names of Confederate leaders from military bases. In recent weeks, his attention shifted, and he demanded that the bill include an unrelated repeal of a legal shield for social media companies.

That demand, registered late in the legislative process, found little support among lawmakers in either party, who regard shoehorning a major unrelated policy move into defense bill as untenable. They have hoped that strong votes in both chambers would cow Mr. Trump into retreating from his veto threat. But the president has given no indication to date that he will do so.

Included in the legislation are a number of noncontroversial, bipartisan measures, including new benefits for tens of thousands of Vietnam-era veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange, a 3 percent increase in pay for service members and a boost in hazardous duty incentive pay.

It would also take 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.

The legislation also directly addresses the protests for racial justice spurred over the summer by the killing of Black Americans, including George Floyd, at the hands of the police. It would require all federal officers enforcing crowd control at protests and demonstrations to identify themselves and their agencies. And it contains the bipartisan measure that directs the Pentagon to begin the process of renaming military bases named after Confederate leaders, a provision that Democrats fought to keep in the bill.

If Mr. Trump were to follow through with his threatened veto, the House would be the first to try at an override.

Emily Cochrane contributing reporting.