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Senate Votes to Cut Bush Request for Iraq War Funds

By JIM RUTENBERG and RACHEL L. SWARNS

WASHINGTON, April 26 — The Senate voted this afternoon to cut some of the money President Bush has requested for the Iraq war and use it instead to increase border patrols against illegal immigrants and buy new boats and helicopters for the Coast Guard.

The vote to trim \$1.9 billion from war spending and divert it to border-security measures was approved, 59 to 39, as the lawmakers continued to wrestle over immigration and spending. A bill to raise \$106 billion in emergency money, much of it for Iraq and hurricane-recovery efforts, is on the Senate floor, but the White House has threatened to veto it unless it is cut back to about \$92 billion, a level the House approved earlier.

Meanwhile, immigration continues to divide the lawmakers, and not just along party lines. At least some of the 59 who voted for the fund-diversion measure, sponsored by Senator Judd Gregg, Republican of New Hampshire and head of the Budget Committee, may have been hoping to break a logjam by appealing to those who have stressed border security as part of any acceptable immigration legislation.

Mr. Gregg angrily rejected as "pure poppycock" any suggestion that his measure would deprive front-line troops in Iraq and Afghanistan of what they need. Fifty-two Republicans and seven Democrats voted for Mr. Gregg's measure. Three Republicans voted against it.

Another measure, to add the border-security money but not subtract from the Pentagon, failed by 54 to 44. It was offered by Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic minority leader.

Today's action came after Republican and Democratic Senate leaders promised to work together to revive the sweeping immigration bill that was killed nearly three weeks ago amid partisan bickering on procedural grounds.

Emerging from a meeting at the White House with President Bush late Tuesday afternoon, Senator Bill Frist, the Republican leader, and Senator Reid said they were confident they could resolve their differences and get a bill passed by Memorial Day.

But participants said that even at the meeting Mr. Frist and Mr. Reid argued over terms for breaking the stalemate, which essentially comes down to how many amendments can be added to the bill. And even should the Senate pass the compromise, which includes provisions for border security, a guest worker program and options for citizenship, it would face stiff opposition in the House.

Representative John A. Boehner, Republican of Ohio, the House majority leader, said Tuesday that he opposed the Senate legislation, which would put a vast majority of illegal immigrants on a path to citizenship.

"I don't think that would be supported by the American people," Mr. Boehner said of the Senate bill while speaking with reporters.

The senators who met with Mr. Bush did not address Mr. Boehner's comments, and said they remained confident that an immigration bill with the stiffer border protections that conservatives want and a path to legalization and even citizenship for illegal workers here would become law by the end of the year.

"In the very near future, we will bring that bill back on the floor of the United States Senate," Mr. Frist said.

Mr. Reid, a regular critic of Mr. Bush, praised the president for bringing the two sides together and said, "Senator Frist and I have to work out a way to handle the procedural quagmire that the Senate is, and we're going to try to do that."

Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, one of about a dozen senators at the meeting, said the session was significant because Mr. Bush seemed to be talking about "not automatic citizenship but the path to citizenship," though Mr. Boehner said that he had no stomach for such a provision and that he hoped Mr. Bush would ultimately not support the Senate bill.

Though senators from both parties said afterward that Mr. Bush seemed to support the bill in principle, they said he did not flat out endorse it.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, said in an interview that Mr. Bush would have to take a more forceful stand to clear up any ambiguity, but White House officials have said that he is trying to stay away from endorsing any one piece of legislation so he can help broker compromise with the House, which is pushing a bill focusing only on enforcement.

Under the Senate plan, illegal immigrants who have lived in the United States for five years or more would eventually be granted citizenship if they remained employed, had background checks, paid fines and back taxes and learned English.

Illegal immigrants who have lived here two to five years would have to travel to a United States border crossing and apply for a temporary work visa, but they would also be eligible for permanent residency and citizenship over time. Illegal immigrants who have been here less than two years would have to leave the country, though they could apply to be in a temporary worker program.

The Senate bill collapsed amid partisan feuding over whether conservatives should be allowed to offer amendments to the legislation.

Republicans, along with Mr. Kennedy, insisted that votes should be allowed on amendments. Mr. Reid blocked votes on the amendments, saying they were intended to gut the legislation.

The Democratic leadership has insisted on assurances that Democratic members of the Judiciary Committee could serve as negotiators with the House over a final bill, an approach that Mr. Frist has rejected.

Senator Mel Martinez, Republican of Florida, said Tuesday that Mr. Reid and Mr. Frist had a brief argument over the terms as Mr. Bush sat between them. A senior Senate aide who was briefed on the meeting afterward said the argument came to a close with Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, pointing to such partisan bickering as an example of what is wrong with Washington. Mr. Martinez said afterward that "they just were back and forth" and that "the meeting moved to a loftier discussion after that."

Mr. Martinez added that the president said, "You know, I don't know what you all do over there, but I understand the difficulty now."

David Stout contributed reporting for this article.