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Edgy GOP Lawmakers Plot Public Relations Strategy

By Susan Crabtree, CQ Staff

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House Republicans are gearing up an eight-point public relations campaign to help the White House sell a sweeping second-term agenda that President Bush will lay out for Congress and the nation this week in his State of the Union address.

During a party retreat at the tony Greenbrier resort in West Virginia, GOP lawmakers were shown a slide presentation sprinkled with new polling data from Dutko Worldwide and advice intended to help Republicans present a unified message. Party leaders are seeking volunteers to take leadership roles on each of the eight issue areas.

Their goal, according to a copy of the presentation, is for the Republican conference to “function more like a modern, savvy public relations firm.”

In his address to the conference, Bush tried to reassure rank-and-file Republicans that he will minimize the political fallout they could face from supporting his plan to create personal Social Security investment accounts.

“He said all the right things, but we have to wait and see,” one GOP lawmaker said. “We’re being asked to do some real heavy lifting.”

Bush told lawmakers he will begin following up on his pledge immediately after his State of the Union address Feb. 2 with a series of campaign-style events in five states in which he will make it clear that the effort to overhaul Social Security is being driven by the White House, not Republicans on Capitol Hill.

Congressional aides said the president shortened his prepared remarks to allow more time for lawmakers’ questions.

“He told us he would help us on providing some cover on some of the toughest battles like Social Security, tax simplification and immigration reform,” said Rob

Portman of Ohio, the House Republican leadership chairman.

But GOP leaders are leaving nothing to chance. House Republican Conference Chairwoman Deborah Pryce of Ohio, who gave the slide presentation, wants more rank-and-file lawmakers to serve as leadership surrogates on television and radio. She pledged to provide more media training for members, and more polling and data analysis.

“We’re going to operate more like a Madison Avenue public relations firm — more emphasis on benchmark polling, more direct-to-constituent contact, editorial placement and town hall meetings,” she said

The eight innocuous sounding categories of proposals Republicans plan to highlight, including economic competitiveness and retirement security, span a heavy load of legislation ahead that is sure to be contentious when lawmakers begin working on the details.

In particular, Republicans who face tough re-election battles in 2006 have been privately fretting about the political ramifications of pushing dramatic changes to the “third rail of politics” — Social Security. (Story, p. 3)

Pryce said Republicans should underscore that the president’s plan will “strengthen and enhance” the current program, “guaranteeing no changes in benefits for current retirees and near-retirees, while giving younger workers the opportunity to use their Social Security payroll taxes to build a nest egg for retirement that can be passed on to their families.”

Bush faces skepticism from many members of his own party on other topics as well. Some Republicans were spoiling for a fight over immigration even before they stepped on the train headed to the Greenbrier.

Bush has proposed creating a temporary guest worker program that would give illegal immigrants working in the United States temporary legal status for as long as six years. Many Republicans in Congress oppose those efforts and want to crack down harder on illegal immigrants.

“I think immigration is the main point of departure” between conservatives in Congress and Bush, said Rep. Ric Keller, R-Fla.

An Iraq supplemental appropriations bill will be on the House floor soon, and Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, has said he plans to attach immigration provisions to that bill. However, Senate Republicans would like to avoid a nasty intraparty battle on the issue so early in the year, and have vowed to fight efforts to attach immigration legislation to the war spending bill.

Bush Responds on Immigration

During the question and answer session at the Greenbrier, one lawmaker pointedly asked Bush about his approach to the issue. Bush responded that he supports tougher enforcement of current laws, but also expressed sympathy with the plight of immigrants, saying they are parents trying to find work and a better life for their families, according to a GOP aide who attended.

Conservatives heard a message more to their liking from the president on the deficit — a topic many fiscal hawks in the party say has not gotten enough attention in the past.

House Budget Chairman Jim Nussle, R-Iowa, said the need for fiscal responsibility and spending restraint was the first thing Bush mentioned after the pool of reporters had to leave the room. “It makes my job easier to sell [the budget] when we’ve got a president who is fully engaged,” Nussle said. “We’ve got a lot of new members that didn’t live through the [cost-cutting] measures of the 1990s.”