

# Civil rights supporters take top congressional posts

Continued from page 1A

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 As on the NAACP report card, they have replaced Republicans James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, William Thomas of California and Peter King of New York, all of whom had Fs.

In the Senate, the Judiciary, 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 Bs on the report card. They replaced Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Susan Collins of Maine, who got all Fs.

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 tip-toeing 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," says 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 fit with one eye on the White House in 2008 - appear fearful that Americans will think they are undermining the commander-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 safe-

ty 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," says 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 redeploy our troops."

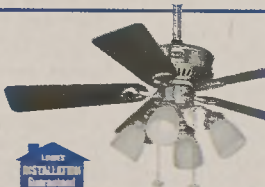
Far less restrained than Pelosi, new Congressional Black Caucus Chairwoman

Carolyn Cheeks-Kilpatrick (D-Mich.), a member of the Appropriations Committee, made it clear at the CBC

swearing in that the CBC motto for the next two years will be "Change the Course."

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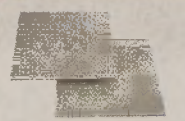
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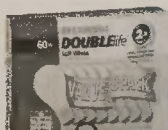
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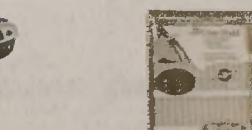
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