The Bush-Frist Connection Should Be A Two-Way Street

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Even if President Bush didn't actually engineer Dr. Bill Frist's election as Senate Majority Leader, this regime change is perceived as a major extension of the President's power because of their close relationship. We hope that Frist will use his influence to help Bush avoid mistakes in judicial nominees, health care and border security.

Conventional wisdom is predicting one and maybe two Supreme Court vacancies this spring, beginning with the Chief Justice's likely retirement. In addition, many other federal court vacancies are waiting to be filled because of the obstructionist tactics of the Daschle-Leahy Democrats in the previous Congress.

The Daschle Democrats have given us advance warning of how they will play the race card by their assaults on Judge Charles Pickering and Senator Trent Lott. Republicans can't possibly win if they merely play defense.

However, the hurdles to be jumped over in the Senate by Bush's Supreme Court nominees aren't only those placed by Democrats. Millions of Bush's own supporters will abandon him if he replaces Chief Justice Rehnquist with someone more liberal.

The best thing Frist can do is to deliver the friendly message that Bush's success as President and his reelection in 2004 will depend more on whom he appoints to the Supreme Court than any other factor. Bush played the war against Iraq as his victory card in the 2002 congressional elections, but in 2004 whatever happens about the Iraq war will rank second to Supreme Court appointments.

Although a newcomer to the game of hardball politics, Dr. Frist should realize how deeply this issues cuts. Bush was elected in 2000 and successful in campaigning for Republican Senate candidates in 2002 largely because of the judicial issue, and his constituency will leave him if he betrays them.

When it comes to Supreme Court nominees, conservatives will not be distracted when the Democrats play the race card (as they will), nor by protestations of a need for ethnic diversity on the Supreme Court, nor by respect for the President's personal friendships. Conservatives voted for Bush because he campaigned praising Justices Scalia and Thomas, and a lesser nomination would have seismic consequences.

Since Frist's career in the real world is as a real M.D., we expect him to lead Congress into dealing with the health care issue. This is not a problem of Americans not getting necessary medical care (no one is turned away from the emergency room); it's the problem of paying the ever-rising costs.

We hope there will finally be some progress in allowing Americans to save for their own medical costs, much as we can save for our own retirement. We hope Dr. Frist will come to the conclusion that the only way to control costs is to restructure the system to allow individuals to make their own health-care decisions with their own money, as in Medical Savings Accounts (MSAs).

The best price control occurs when individuals can shop around, and spend or withhold their own money as they did at retail stores this Christmas season. The time has come to remove the crippling restraints on

personal MSAs, such as the artificial 50-employee limit for group plans that Bill Clinton and Ted Kennedy inserted in the last major health care bill in 1996.

The third matter that we hope will benefit from the Senate Majority Leader's open access to the White House is border security. The President is out of sync with the American people on this issue, and Bill Frist will be doing Bush a big political favor if he reports how the grassroots feel about our government's failure to protect America.

Frist should tell the President to forget about passing amnesty for illegal aliens, a terrible idea that can never shake the label "sheer lunacy." Frist should tell the President that the American people would rather he stationed U.S. troops on our own borders than on the borders of Yugoslavia.

Frist should tell the President that he is facing a public relations disaster when Americans start seeing uninspected Mexican trucks driven by non-English-speaking drivers rolling across our highways, and he had better figure out a way to avoid that backlash.

Frist should tell the President that legislation to monitor law- abiding Americans (i.e., national I.D. card, Trusted Traveler, and Total Information Awareness) is not going to pass, but that legislation to stop potential terrorists from entering our country would have easy sledding. For starters, he should support repeal of Ted Kennedy's Visa Diversity Lottery program.

The voters won't believe the Bush Administration is sincere about homeland security unless it faces up to the case of John Lee Malvo. It's not enough to give him the death penalty; we want punishment for the government officials who let this illegal alien loose to go on his killing spree instead of deporting him as the law required.

Bill Frist will be attending many meetings at the White House. We hope those meetings will be a two-way street.