Senate OKs Satcher as surgeon general, snubbing opposition led by Ashcroft

BY TIM POOR
Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Senate easily approved Dr. David Satcher on Tuesday as the nation's surgeon general, handing a rebuff to Sen. John Ashcroft, R-Mo., and other conservatives who had opposed the nomination.

Nineteen Republicans, including Sen. Christopher S. Bond, R-Mo., joined all of the Democrats in voting for Satcher, who was confirmed by a vote of 65-35.

Ashcroft had led the unsuccessful battle against Satcher, one of several administration appointments on which he has taken a high profile in opposing.

Later Tuesday, Ashcroft had an unusually heated exchange on the Senate floor over his attempts to defeat Judge Frederica Massiah-Jackson, whom President Bill Clinton has nominated to the federal bench. A vote on her nomination was postponed.

Satcher said after he was confirmed: "This is an American dream come true, to go from a humble farm in Anniston, Ala., to the office of surgeon general, to have the chance to serve the country I love, and to earn the confidence of so many leaders I honor and respect."

Satcher, 56, has headed the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta since 1992. Besides being the nation's top health spokesman, he will be sworn in Friday as an assistant secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Clinton called Satcher "a mainstream physician who is an eloquent advocate for the health of all Americans."

Satcher's nomination sailed through the Senate on Tuesday despite Ashcroft's persistent criticism. He argued that Satcher was unfit for the surgeon general's job because of his position on "partial-birth abortion." He also cited Satcher's support for a controversial AIDS tests in Africa and the United States, as well as the nominee's promotion of tests of needle-exchanges to study their impact on the spread of AIDS.

Satcher's supporters included Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn., who said he was satisfied that Satcher would not promote abortion. Satcher has said he supports a ban on the late-term abortion procedure "in concept" but that he thinks it should be available in some circumstances.

Thompson said it was not unreasonable for Satcher to agree with Clinton's position. He said it was "unfortunate" that opponents who disagreed with Clinton on abortion had brought Satcher's ethics into the debate.

Last week, Ashcroft said that opposition to Satcher was building and that his nomination was "on shaky ground." Asked Tuesday what had happened, Ashcroft said, "I don't know."

'Drip, drip, drip of opposition'

Ashcroft did gain support for his objection to the nomination of Massiah-Jackson, who is a judge in Philadelphia. Judiciary Committee Chairman Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said he was reconsidering his earlier support for her after the outspoken opposition of prosecutors and police in Pennsylvania.

They cited several examples of what they said was the judge's bias against law enforcement, including her request for a prosecutor to "shut your (expletive) mouth" and her identification of undercover narcotics detectives to spectators in the courtroom during a drug case.

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., who had been shepherding Massiah-Jackson's nomination through the Senate, said a vote should be delayed for the judiciary committee to hear her response. Specter noted that many of the examples were cited by critics only recently, after the committee had heard from the nominee.

Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., agreed.

"We've had this drip, drip, drip of opposition," he said. "I'm a bit bothered by the fact that it came out at such a late time, in such unprofessional fashion."

Ashcroft said another hearing wasn't needed.

He said Massiah-Jackson was "a profane judge" who would have been confirmed at Specter's urging last fall had Ashcroft not delayed the vote to ensure a debate. He said that to confirm her "would be to betray our oath of office."

That prompted an angry reply from Specter, a former prosecutor. He said Ashcroft's statements were insulting.

"I know what my oath of office is," he said. He said Ashcroft had made "a good political speech" but that he should "hear both sides of the case." Specter added that Ashcroft hadn't attended Massiah-Jackson's committee hearing.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

DSW 133027

STLCOPCB4032985