

Extracted from "Action in Congress" by Tom Philpott, Contributing Editor

Graham "Adamant" on TRS

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) said he was "adamant" about getting final approval of his plan to open Tricare Reserve Select insurance to any drilling Guard or Reserve member.

The Senate this summer had approved Graham's proposal to let reserve component members join the insurance plan. All signs pointed to tough negotiations with the House, however.

Graham, chairman of the Senate armed services subcommittee on military personnel, called his Reserve Tricare provision "absolutely essential" to taking "better care" of reservists and families while improving recruiting and readiness.

In the summer months, Graham said in an interview, reserve component casualties in Iraq outnumbered active duty losses. He added that operational demands on reserve forces "are going to grow, not lessen."

As a result, he added, the military needed "new benefits for a new war." The cornerstone of an improved benefits package would be access to full-time military health care, Graham said.

TRS Politics, Up and Down

Graham's amendment gathered impressive political support. Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), both members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, co-sponsored his measure.

They were joined by SASC chairman Sen. John Warner (R-Va.). Warner planned to champion Graham's provision in a conference with House members.

The House was divided in early fall. The House Armed Services Committee had adopted a similar amendment from Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Miss.), but the chairman, Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Cal-if.), excised it, saying it violated House budget rules. Its sponsors did not identify ways to offset its cost—estimated to reach \$3.85 billion over five years.

Bush Administration leaders and House Republicans worried that there would be no brake on TRS costs. They said civilian employers likely would take advantage of the expanded benefit to tighten their own offerings to employees serving in reserve components. Some employers already pay reservists to use Tricare rather than employer-provided insurance, said the Pentagon.