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Without attending the event, using the advisory and press release I forwarded to him, John Fogarty at White House Bulletin wrote the following story today about the launch of the Hispanic Conference. The complete text of today's Bulletin is attached. -Elizabeth

Five Republican House Members Announce Formation Of "Congressional Hispanic Conference." Reps. Henry Bonilla, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lincoln Diaz-Balart, Devin Nunes and Mario Diaz-Balart scheduled an afternoon news conference today where they were expected to announce the formation of the Congressional Hispanic Conference. The statement prepared for the news conference lists the group's priorities, including: "support of President Bush and American troops in the war against terrorism, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), tax relief to families, through eliminating the death tax and the marriage penalty," and backing "faith based initiatives and educational choice for all."

Ros-Lehtinen, who will serve as Chair of the Congressional Hispanic Conference, says in a statement prepared for delivery, "The newly formed Congressional Hispanic Conference...will let all Hispanics know that their issues and concerns are being listened to and acted upon in the US Congress. Lower taxes, affordable health care and the education of our youth are all issues which are dear to the Republican Party and to Hispanics as well and we will fight our hardest to assure that the largest minority group in the United States have a loud and powerful voice in Congress."

Bonilla adds in his statement, "Many Americans think the Congressional Hispanic Caucus represents Hispanics -- that is not the case. Today we make clear that there is another voice. Today we introduce a group who will look out for the best interests of all Hispanics -- not just those with liberal politics. I am proud to serve as a founding member of this group and look forward to great progress."

THE WHITE HOUSE ***BULLETIN***

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SUBJECT: TODAY'S BRIEFING

DATE: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2003

OFF THE WIRES:

- **Arafat Appoints Longtime Deputy Abbas Prime Minister.** Palestinian President Yasser Arafat appointed his longtime deputy Mahmoud Abbas prime minister today, a senior Palestinian official said. According to legislation creating the new post, Abbas has the authority to appoint the Cabinet and call it into session, and he is responsible for overseeing its functions. Legislator Hanan Ashrawi said, "It's the beginning of a transition -- it is certainly a turning point and a qualitative shift in the political culture. Now we have power-sharing that is clearly spelled out." Arafat remains overall commander of Palestinian security forces, and also has final say in negotiations with Israel.

IN THE WHITE HOUSE AND AROUND TOWN:

- **Bush Aides Say Timing Of Attack On Iraq Is Up To Military.** President Bush was meeting today with his foreign policy and military advisors as Bush's deadline for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to depart the country approached. Bush aides said the White House has no plans to mark the deadline and that war will not necessarily begin at 8 p.m. tonight. They said Bush would decide on the timing of military action based on the advice of military leaders.

White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer said this morning, "On the brink of war with Iraq, Americans should be prepared for what we hope will be as precise and short a conflict as possible, but there are many unknowns. It could be a matter of some duration; we do not know. Americans have to be prepared for loss of life. Americans have to be prepared for the importance of disarming Saddam Hussein to protect the peace."

Turkey Moving Toward Allowing Fly-Overs But Not Base Access. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said today his country is moving toward opening its airspace to US military planes but not allowing them access to air bases. A parliamentary vote on the proposal is expected tomorrow. Such a decision would result in Turkey forfeiting a US aid package of up to \$30 billion in grants and loans.

Germany Allows Fly-Over Rights. Germany today guaranteed the US fly-over rights. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder also rejected calls for a parliamentary votes on whether to allow German troops on NATO reconnaissance flights over Turkey and on keeping nuclear and chemical contamination detection units in Kuwait. Several members of Schroeder's coalition of Social Democrats and Greens have expressed reservations about allowing Germans to join NATO AWACS radar plane crews in flights over Turkish airspace, arguing the flights could assist the US-led attack on Iraq.

US Bombs More Iraqi Positions In Southern No-Fly Zone. US planes bombed Iraqi positions after coalition planes patrolling the southern no-fly zone were fired on, Admiral John Kelly told reporters aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln today. Kelly said "a series of targets" which he described as command and control positions were hit. Kelly added, "We're seeing some fortifications that were built over the last month or two months being occupied. Mostly we're seeing high-value targets, surface-to-air missiles, moving in an effort by them to increase their survivability." Kelly said Saddam Hussein "continues to reposition his forces. We continue to use our intelligence gathering abilities to adjust to this and to be prepared."

Almost 2 Million Leaflets Dropped In Southern Iraq. The US military said today coalition planes dropped almost 2 million more leaflets into Iraq today, targeting 29 military and civilian sites in the southeastern part of the country. The leaflets carried various messages. A US military statement said, "Some stressed that Coalition forces do not wish to harm innocent Iraqis. One message informed Iraqi citizens that they could be the victims if Saddam Hussein uses chemical weapons. Another message encouraged the Iraqi military to refrain from using weapons of mass destruction or burning oil fields." Officials in Washington said

one of the main purposes of the leaflets is to persuade Iraqi forces in the south to step aside when coalition forces move in from Kuwait.

General Warns Response To Iraqi Chemical Attack Would Be "Dramatic." Gen. David McKiernan, the top US commander in Kuwait, warned Iraq today, "It would be a hugely bad choice on the part of any Iraqi leader or commander to employ chemical weapons." He promised that the allied response to such an attack would be "dramatic."

Iraqi Parliament Pledges Loyalty To Saddam. In an emergency session today, deputies in Iraq's parliament issued a letter pledging their loyalty to President Saddam Hussein. Several chanted, "We'll sacrifice our blood and souls for Saddam." Speaker Saadoun Hammadi told reporters afterward that "it is unthinkable for Saddam Hussein to leave" the country.

Italian Prime Minister Backs Use Of Force, Faults France. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi today backed military action in Iraq and said France had derailed diplomatic efforts. As the Italian parliament prepared to vote on opening the country's air space to US fly-overs, Berlusconi said, "The game is in play between those who historically have been committed to the liberty of men and those who have transformed their country into a chamber of torture. It seems to me that France made a mistake, saying it would have used its veto against another resolution. Resolution 1441...still applies and thus the conditions to authorize the use of force." Though Berlusconi was heckled repeatedly during his speech, the parliament is expected to approve the measure later today. Berlusconi repeated that Italian troops would not participate in the war, however.

Sharon Says Little Risk Of Iraqi Missile Strike; \$2 Billion Defense In Place. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told his Cabinet today there is little risk of Iraq hitting Israel with missiles but that the armed forces are ready for the worst. Since the 1991 Gulf War, when Israel was hit by 39 Scud missiles, Israel has installed a \$2 billion-plus missile defense system. US forces man three of at least eight Patriot anti-missile batteries now in Israel. Sharon also praised the US for its determination to strip Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. Said Sharon, "The war being waged, which will be waged, is not a war in which we are involved. We hope their efforts will be successful." Though Israel stayed on the sidelines of the 1991 conflict, this time it has reserved the right to retaliate. A government spokesman said counterattack options were not discussed at today's Cabinet session, however.

US Officials Deny Aziz Rumors. US officials denied this morning that Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz had either defected to US authorities or was shot trying to flee Baghdad. "These rumors are just not true," one official told Reuters.

- o **Ridge Says Al Qaeda Still Principal Terror Threat.** Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge told ABC television this morning that Al Qaeda remains "the principle threat" to commit an act of terrorism against the US. Ridge said that "between what our allies have acquired and what we've learned over the past couple of weeks, it has reached the point that we are at a higher level of risk at this time. Bin Laden has also said that if we move military into Iraq, he will use this as a rallying cry. Again, it's very much about bin Laden and Al Qaeda primarily." Asked whether there is a specific threat, Ridge said, "The traffic discusses targeting US and coalition interests around the world, US interests domestically and internationally. And again, the general references to different sectors, the general references to soft targets, again I think if you took a look at the litany of generic references that we pick up from our sources, you'd find that they've, in one manner, shape or form, talked about a lot of things in this country, but not with the kind of specificity that we would like to see and, frankly, not with the specificity that a lot of people think we get."

\$3 Billion Coming To States, Cities To Shore Up Security Efforts. In an earlier interview with NBC, Ridge was asked about states and cities which are saying they cannot afford to take the anti-terror measures Ridge has suggested and that they have not received money promised by Washington. Ridge answered, "First of all, when I spoke with the governors a couple of nights ago, they all understood that we have to improve security and I think they've all undertaken a very robust and broad-ranging group of security precautions. Secondly, the President has said that he would ask for a supplemental. There will be a homeland security piece of that supplemental." Asked when states and cities can expect to get more money, Ridge responded, "Well, I think it really depends on when the decision is made to ask for the supplemental and it'll be forthcoming. But I must tell you...that we now have out applications far in excess of \$1 billion to the states and the locals, for law enforcement and first-responders. We'll put another \$1 billion out that was appropriated by the Congress. So in due time there will be about \$3 billion available to the governors and the mayors to help them shore up their efforts to make America more secure."

Color-Coded Terror Alert Levels Meant For Government Professionals. Appearing on CBS, Ridge was asked how he plans to “avoid the sort of hysterical duct-tape buying and the run on water that we saw the last time the threat level was raised.” Said Ridge, “I think Americans over the past couple of months, since we’ve raised the threat level -- this is the third occasion -- have begun to understand that when we raise the threat, when we go from yellow to orange or when we engage additional security measures with Liberty Shield, that this is really our work with government, with security personnel, with law enforcement, and I think they understand that the national threat warning is really for the professionals, not for them. Hopefully, as we’ve seen with over 100 million hits on the ready.gov website, that people are learning more about what they can do to be prepared. But by and large, I think Americans understand the reality of the 21st century and trust the professionals to keep them safe.”

Bloomberg Makes Case To White House For NYC Security Aid. President Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge met with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg this morning, after which Bloomberg called it a “great meeting.” Bloomberg told reporters New Yorkers “are behind the President and our prayers are with him and with our troops overseas.” He added, “We do have, in New York, some special needs in the sense that we represent to the whole world a lot of things that terrorists find very threatening. And we obviously can use every bit of help that we can get from Washington and also from Governor Pataki in Albany, who’ve been very helpful, in terms of providing resources.” Bloomberg also thanked Ridge, saying, “He’s got a very difficult job. Pulling together disparate groups, coordinating our resources to meet a changing world is perhaps the hardest job in government. And my hat’s off to him.”

Asked what he requested in terms of dollars, Bloomberg said, “We didn’t talk specifics, but our great interest is that the monies that are distributed and made available are based on where the risks are and on need.” He added, “Clearly, New York City was ground zero before, and because it is such a diverse city where people can express their views, where all of the world’s religions are practiced, it’s the target.”

Ridge indicated he was on the same wavelength. In remarks to reporters preceding Bloomberg’s, Ridge said, “We understand the primacy that the terrorists place on densely populated area. We know they go after economic targets. And the city of New York obviously remains a part of this national infrastructure that is a target.” He also said “no final determinations have been made” regarding the supplemental budget request.

- **House Leaders Looking To “Wall Off” Medicare As They Grow Vote On Budget Resolution.** Lacking the votes to pass their budget resolution, House GOP leaders have been engaging in a series of meetings to tweak the bill in an effort to get to a majority. While some are claiming the leadership is dozens of votes short, a House GOP leadership source told the Bulletin the number is not that high, but a scheduled 11:00 Rules Committee meeting today on the budget resolution will likely be pushed back to later in the day.

According to knowledgeable sources, there are “competing” alternatives the House GOP leaders are weighing right now. One is a funding boost for both Medicare and Medicaid, but that is said to be “not the frontrunner.” Instead, House GOP leaders are looking at “walling off” the Medicare program from cuts. The budget resolution passed by the Committee called for the underlying program to be cut even as \$400 billion is set aside for a prescription drug benefit to be integrated into the program. That has resurrected memories for some of the 1996 budget battle in which Democrats blasted Republicans for supporting tax cuts for the rich while “cutting” Medicare to pay for it – a battle many Republicans are not eager to replay. And while Republican leaders appear to be focusing on Medicare, apparently believing that Medicaid is not a potent political issue, others are dusting off the MMEE – Medicare, Medicaid, Environment and Education – to remind colleagues of the mantra and agenda used by Democrats in the 90s to eat into the House GOP majority.

- **Senate GOP Leaders Seek To Force Issue On Budget Resolution.** The Senate’s stalemate over tax cuts continues, but the Senate GOP leadership intends to force the issue by bringing the budget resolution to a vote this week. Currently there are three floating coalitions in the Senate, none of which can muster a majority right now. There is one group which backs the President’s plan to provide \$700 billion+ in tax relief over ten years, a second group which seeks a smaller number, and a third group which wants no tax cuts. While an extended debate today on ANWR threatens to delay final consideration of the budget resolution, a Senate Budget Committee source tells the Bulletin that GOP leaders still plan on voting this week.

The current nose counting suggests that GOP leaders are a handful of votes shy of 51. However, a Senate Budget Committee source said that GOP leaders are committed to “moving forward,” and they will force members to demonstrate where they stand on the President’s plan via a vote. According to the committee source, no Senator has yet come forward with an actual amendment to change the tax cut number in the budget resolution.

- **House Approves Tax Bill.** The House approved by voice vote today the Tax Relief, Simplification and Equity Act of 2003, designed to simplify and make more equitable 14 provisions in the tax code. Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas, the bill's sponsor, said, "The provisions in this bill exemplify areas of the tax code that do not make sense and should not remain in the tax code one day longer."

According to a Ways and Means press release, "HR 1308 adjusts areas of the Tax Code that penalize farmers who are stricken by drought, flood or other weather-related conditions. The legislation also helps small businesses to flourish rather than face possible bankruptcy by closing loopholes that place an unfair tax burden on their products. In addition, the bill provides for assistance to families whose children have been injured as a result of the Hepatitis A vaccination, as well as expands the orphan drug tax credit to help speed the accessibility of cures for diseases to those who need them. Other provisions grant tax relief to astronauts who perish in a space shuttle mission, including those who lost their lives in the space shuttle Columbia disaster, and extends the special capital gain exclusion for home sales for members of the military to members of the Foreign Service."
- **Democrats Poised To Defeat Artic National Wildlife Refuge Drilling Provision.** Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle and Senators Barbara Boxer, Dick Durbin, Joe Lieberman and Ron Wyden held what one Senate aide described as a "rally" on Capitol Hill this morning in anticipation of passing an amendment to the FY2004 Budget Resolution that would strike a provision from the resolution that "could lead to the opening of the Arctic National." Supporters and opponents of the amendment agreed this morning that the amendment, sponsored by Boxer and Republican Sen. Lincoln Chafee is likely to pass. The vote is expected to be taken today.

A Senate aide, whose boss backs the Boxer-Chafee amendment, said, "It ain't over 'til it's over, but things are looking very good for us this morning." Other Senate sources on both sides of the issue told the Bulletin the Administration's bid to open the refuge to oil drilling, as one source said, "is poised for defeat." The source said head counts by both sides found "at least 52 senators would oppose drilling in the refuge."
- **Commerce Secretary Evans Unveils Plan To Reduce Trade Barriers, Increase Global Competition.** Commerce Secretary Don Evans this morning released an eight-point "Standards Initiative" he said was designed "to help break down trade barriers." Evans added, "The initiative is in response to industry concerns that foreign standards and technical regulation issues are becoming among of the greatest challenges to expanding exports."

At a news conference held to release the plan, Evans said, "The Bush Administration remains committed to promoting competition and opening new markets for US goods. Standards and testing are key to our international competitiveness. But more and more we are hearing that foreign standards and testing requirements are keeping our products out of foreign markets. This is the wrong approach that reduces efficiencies, limits competition and increases prices for the consumer goods. This eight-point initiative is an effort to create a more level playing field around the world."

The Standards Initiative includes:

 - "Developing a Commerce Global Standards Activity Assessment: The Technology Administration, through the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), will take the lead in conducting a standards activity assessment of all existing Commerce Department programs and efforts to reduce standards-related barriers in foreign markets. Following consultations with industry and other stakeholders, recommendations will be made to the Secretary for future action."
 - "Reinforcing Expertise in Key Markets: NIST and the International Trade Administration (ITA) have developed a new, redesigned, intensive training program for standards liaisons posted abroad."
 - "Devising an Effective Training and Outreach Program: NIST and ITA, in cooperation with US standards development organizations, will develop a standards training program for all Commerce Department Foreign Commercial Service Officers."
 - "Creating a 'Best Practices' Database: Working with its offices abroad, other government agencies, and industry, the Commerce Department will develop a database of 'best practices' in addressing standards issues in foreign markets."
 - "Expanding the Early Warning System: The Commerce Department will strengthen and expand 'Export Alert!', a free, web-based service to disseminate market intelligence and information on standards developments in key priority foreign markets in Europe, Asia, and Latin America."

- “Partnering with the President’s Export Council on Standards Leadership: The Commerce Department will support the development of a dialogue on standards within the proposed President’s Export Council subcommittee on technology and competitiveness.”
 - “Reaching out to US Industry: The Commerce Department will host a series of industry-specific roundtables to gather input from US industry on the most pressing standards issues and priority foreign markets.”
 - “Appointing a Liaison at the International Trade Administration: A senior official will be named to act as ITA’s Standards Liaison with US industry to ensure that industry’s priorities on standards are promoted through the Commerce Department’s international policies and programs, and will also work closely with other US government agencies.”
- **SEC Charges HealthSouth, CEO, With \$1.4 Billion In Accounting Fraud.** The SEC announced today it has charged HealthSouth Corporation and CEO Richard M. Scrushy with \$1.4 billion in accounting fraud. HealthSouth is the country’s largest provider of outpatient surgery, diagnostic and rehabilitative health care services. According to an SEC news release issued this morning, the commission charges that in 1999, at Scrushy’s insistence, HealthSouth “systematically overstated its earnings by at least \$1.4 billion in order to meet or exceed Wall Street earnings expectations. The false increases in earnings were matched by false increases in HealthSouth’s assets. By the third quarter of 2002, HealthSouth’s assets were overstated by at least \$800 million, or approximately 10 percent.” The SEC suspended trading in HealthSouth securities for two days. SEC Enforcement Director Stephen Cutler said, “HealthSouth’s fraud represents an appalling betrayal of investors.” The SEC said it is seeking civil penalties, surrender “of all ill-gotten gains or losses avoided by both defendants, and an order prohibiting Scrushy from ever serving as an officer or director of a public company.”

Also today, the Justice Department said former HealthSouth Chief Financial Officer Weston Smith has agreed to plead guilty to securities fraud, conspiracy, wire fraud and false certification of financial records. The department said Smith has agreed to cooperate with the government’s ongoing investigation.
 - **Stabenow Says “Special Interest Thimerosal Provision Has Been Dropped From Bio-terrorism Legislation.”** Sen. Debbie Stabenow told a rally of families of autism victims on Capitol Hill today that a “special interest Thimerosal provision has been dropped from bio-terrorism legislation.” Stabenow said, “I was surprised and disappointed to learn last week that this provision, identical to one which the House and Senate recently voted to remove from the Homeland Security bill, was attached to new legislation -- in this case, legislation dealing with smallpox and bio-terrorism. I was pleased to learn today that this provision has now been pulled from the draft of the bill, even before the bill goes to its first committee markup.”
 - **Frost Says Rules Committee Is “Stifling Democracy” By Blocking Democratic Amendments To Bankruptcy Bill.** Rep. Martin Frost this morning charges that in approving the rule it did for House consideration of the bankruptcy bill, the Rules Committee “continued its strategy to stifle democracy by blocking serious and substantive Democratic amendments.” Frost continued, “The rule made in order a substitute amendment offered by Rep. Conyers, the Ranking Member of the Judiciary Committee, as well as an amendment offered by Rep. Sherman and a technical amendment offered by Rep. Gutierrez. Unfortunately, the Committee refused to allow the House to consider six amendments that our Democratic colleagues brought to the Committee. While the Chairman of the Rules Committee contends that making in order the substitute and the two Democratic amendments makes for a fair rule, Democratic Members should know what was not made in order in order to judge for themselves the fairness of this rule.” He added, “These six were serious, substantive amendments that should have been given the opportunity to be debated and voted on by the full House.”

Frost listed the amendments that the committee refused to allow:

 - “An amendment by Rep. Schakowsky that would protect against the bill’s means test the following groups: unemployed people who have exhausted their benefits, active duty members of the armed forces, and victims of terrorism.”
 - “An amendment by Rep. Waters that would prohibit credit card companies from issuing cards to people under 21 years of age.”
 - “An amendment from Reps. Conyers, Slaughter, and Jackson Lee that would give courts the discretion to provide extra protection for people entitled to alimony or child support.”

- “An amendment by Rep. Delahunt that would place a \$125,000 national cap on the homestead exemption, without any of the exceptions allowed in the underlying bill.”
 - “Another amendment by Rep. Delahunt that would place reasonable limits on exorbitant ‘retention bonuses’, severance packages, and other payments to corporate insiders of companies that are bankrupt or facing bankruptcy.”
 - “An amendment by Rep. Jackson Lee that would crack down on the predatory lending practice known as ‘payday lending.’”
- **China Releases US Resident Teng Chunyan After 3 Years.** Chinese-born former New York City resident Teng Chunyan was released from a Beijing prison today after serving almost three years for publicizing details of China’s crackdown on the dissident Falun Gong group. Teng told reporters, “Falun Gong is purely an evil cult. It has a definite political aspect.” Teng has made similar comments in prison interviews, and Falun Gong activists have suggested she may have been brainwashed or tortured. Teng, who is married to an American, has permanent US resident status.
 - **Five Republican House Members Announce Formation Of “Congressional Hispanic Conference.”** Reps. Henry Bonilla, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lincoln Diaz-Balart, Devin Nunes and Mario Diaz-Balart scheduled an afternoon news conference today where they were expected to announce the formation of the Congressional Hispanic Conference. The statement prepared for the news conference lists the group’s priorities, including: “support of President Bush and American troops in the war against terrorism, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), tax relief to families, through eliminating the death tax and the marriage penalty,” and backing “faith based initiatives and educational choice for all.”
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 Bonilla adds in his statement, “Many Americans think the Congressional Hispanic Caucus represents Hispanics – that is not the case. Today we make clear that there is another voice. Today we introduce a group who will look out for the best interests of all Hispanics – not just those with liberal politics. I am proud to serve as a founding member of this group and look forward to great progress.”
 - **Club For Growth Endorses Isset In Texas Special Election.** The “Reaganite” Club for Growth has endorsed Carl Isset in the May 3 special election in TX 19, being held to fill the upcoming vacancy being created by Rep. Larry Combest’s retirement.
 - **Political Notes. Presidential.** As the New York Times was reporting on the split in the Democratic Party on Iraq, **Sen. Joseph Lieberman** said on Fox News’s “O’Reilly Factor” that he “wouldn’t have done anything differently” from the way **President Bush** has. Lieberman also said on the show that the Democratic Party will not elect a president until “the American people trust us to be tough on security questions when you’ve got to be tough.” ... The Washington Post writes that “as long as Iraq looms, [Howard] Dean has a sheen.” In fact, House Majority Leader **Tom DeLay** “is drawing as much attention as possible” to Dean in an effort to push other Democratic prospects “go out on a limb and match his anti-war rhetoric,” the Hill reports. ... The Washington Post profiles **Gary Hart**, who, at a speaking engagement warned of “possible nuclear catastrophes in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles” and said the battle for Baghdad could resemble the film “Black Hawk Down” played out in the “streets of a city the size of Paris.”
Governors. The New York Times reports that Connecticut GOP **Gov. John Rowland** will pay up to \$50,000 to a Hartford law firm to represent several of his administration officials testifying in a federal grand jury corruption investigation tomorrow. ... Alabama **Gov. Bob Riley** (R) has agreed to accept a five percent pay cut, the Mobile Register reports.
Senate. Rumors are circulating that **Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell** (R) might not seek a third term in Colorado if he is offered the leadership of the US Olympic Committee, the Washington Post reports. ... The “news around Washington” is that US HUD Secretary **Mel Martinez** (R) is still mulling a Florida run, UPI reports. In a letter to the Orlando Sentinel, Martinez expressed his disappointment at incumbent Democratic **Sen. Bob Graham**’s “vote last week to impede the nomination of Miguel Estrada.” ...The White House is

trying to get ex-Gov. **Ed Schafer** to challenge Democratic **Sen. Byron Dorgan** in North Dakota, the Hill reports. ... White House political adviser **Karl Rove** will speak at a fundraiser for GOP **Rep. Richard Burr's** North Carolina Senate campaign next month, the Raleigh News and Observer reports. ... Senate Minority Leader **Tom Daschle** (D) has "revamped his political operation, putting a stronger emphasis on fundraising for his own re-election but also working numerous party events into his national travels" as he gets ready for another South Dakota run, Roll Call reports.

House. The New York Post's Page Six reports that "hundreds of well-heeled Washingtonians paid \$1,000 to \$5,000 per ticket to attend **Rep. Patrick Kennedy's** St. Patrick's Day fund-raiser on Capitol Hill -- but Kennedy was a no-show." ... Democratic IL4 **Rep. Luis Gutierrez** has endorsed a Republican for Town President in Cicero, the Chicago Tribune reports.

POLL WATCH:

Zogby Poll Shows Double Digit Bush Lead Over All Potential Democratic Challengers. The latest Zogby International Poll (3/18) of 1,129 likely voters conducted March 14-15 (+/- 3%) shows:

2004 General Election:

- 50% said would vote for President Bush; 38% said they would vote for Sen. Joe Lieberman.
- 50% said would vote for President Bush; 38% said they would vote for Rep. Richard Gephardt.
- 49% said would vote for President Bush; 36% said they would vote for Sen. John Kerry.
- 51% said would vote for President Bush; 32% said they would vote for Sen. John Edwards.
- 54% said would vote for President Bush; 31% said they would vote for Former Sen. Gary Hart.
- 52% said would vote for President Bush; 31% said they would vote for Former Governor Howard Dean.
- 54% said would vote for President Bush; 30% said they would vote for Former Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun.
- 52% said would vote for President Bush; 26% said they would vote for Rep. Dennis Kucinich.
- 58% said would vote for President Bush; 25% said they would vote for Rev. Al Sharpton.
- 52% said would vote for President Bush; 42% said they would vote for Former Vice President Al Gore.
- 52% said would vote for President Bush; 39% said they would vote for Sen. Hillary Clinton.
- 52% said would vote for President Bush; 28% said they would vote for General Wesley Clark.

NBC News/WSJ Poll Finds Bush's Job Approval At 62%, 65% Support Iraq War. The latest NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll of 506 interviews conducted March 17 (+/- 4%) shows:

Bush Job Performance:

- 62% said they "approve" of the job President Bush is doing; 33% said they "disapprove" of the job Bush is doing; 5% were "not sure."

Iraq War Support:

- 65% said the US "should" take military action against Iraq; 30% said the US "should not" take military action against Iraq; 5% were "not sure."
- 59% said they think the Bush Administration "has adequately prepared the American people" for war with Iraq; 38% said they think the Bush Administration "has not adequately prepared the American people" for war with Iraq; 3% were "not sure."
- 52% said they think if Saddam is removed from power, the threat of terrorism will "increase"; 16% said they think if Saddam is removed from power, the threat of terrorism will "decrease"; 29% said they think if Saddam is removed from power, the threat of terrorism will "stay about the same"; 3% were "not sure."

ABC News/Money Magazine Poll Indicates Increasing Pessimism Towards Economy. The latest ABC News/Money Magazine Poll of 1,005 telephone interviews in the month ending March 16 (+/- 3) shows:

- 9% of Americans said the economy is "getting better"; 52% said the economy is "getting worse"; 39% said the economy is "staying the same."
- 22% of Americans rate the current economy "positively"; 34% said the buying climate is "positive"; 55% rate their own finances "positively."

LAST LAUGHS:

Late Night Political Humor.

The late-night shows were reruns last night.

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