

Senate and House now must find magic pill

In search of compromise to placate liberals without driving off conservatives

BY LORI MONTGOMERY AND ALEC MACGILLIS

At 7 a.m. Thursday, the Senate plans to push landmark health-care legislation over the finish line with the last in a string of midnight and daybreak votes capping months of infighting and procedural delays. And with that, the hardest work of all will begin: reckoning with long-standing differences with the House version and uniting behind a single bill that can be sent to the president.

Democrats are already outlining a strategy to achieve a final compromise that can satisfy the more liberal House without upsetting the painstakingly assembled coalition of 60 Senate Democrats and independents.

Central to those talks, House leaders said, will be the search for an acceptable substitute for a government-run insurance plan that those without medical coverage could purchase, a provision the House designed to compete with private insurers and force them to rein in costs. While the Senate has decisively rejected the "public option," House leaders say they will demand other concessions to ensure that Americans can afford the insurance they will be required to buy if the bill becomes law.

"We have to be absolutely convinced that this is going to accomplish the goal of holding down the cost of health insurance. The American consumer cannot be left hostage to the whims of private insurance," said Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), a member of the House leadership. "We're asking every American to share some responsibility in getting health insurance; we need to ensure that every American can afford it."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has signaled approval for the Senate's solution: the creation of at least two nationwide insurance plans run by private companies but overseen by the Office of Personnel Management, the same federal agency that handles health insurance for members of Congress. In a conference call Wednesday, Pelosi also assured rank-and-file Democrats that they would not be asked to rubber-stamp the Senate

HEALTH CARE CONTINUED ON A4



PHOTOS BY TRACY A. WOODWARD/THE WASHINGTON POST

Shelby Kiesel, 5, of Maryland waits in Santa's village at the Merrifield Garden Center to speak to the man himself. Older children, from fourth- to sixth-graders, also believe in Santa, who has been visiting the garden center for more than 30 years.

Under Santa's ageless spell

Older children hold fast to their faith in Saint Nick, and to their innocence

BY ANNIE GOWEN

Galen Henderson is 11 years old, and she believes in Santa Claus.

She is steadfast in this belief, despite taunts from other kids on the bus and in the cafeteria, who tell her: He can't possibly be real. Santa is a big fat fraud in a red suit. How could he get all those presents out to every child in the world in one night?

"I hear it at school, mostly. I just say, 'Sure, if you think that, then you can think that,'" Galen said with an airy shrug.

She's certain they're wrong because she has met the real Santa at, of all places, a garden center in Fairfax County. She has been going to see him every Christmas since she was little. Last year, he remembered that her dog's name is Eli, and he brought her a Wii her family couldn't afford.

Her conviction is shared by other late believers, a small but stubborn band of fourth-, fifth- and even sixth-graders who



Galen Henderson, 11, a repeat visitor, sits with Santa at the garden center. Her belief in him is buoyed by the fact that he remembers the name of her dog, Eli.

refuse to bow to conventional wisdom on the question of Santa's existence. Like Galen, many eagerly wait in line for hours to see Santa at the Merrifield Garden Center in Falls Church each year, jockeying for space with toddlers and their parents in a garland-and-light festooned Santa house.

Santa has been appearing there for more than 30 years and has a slavishly de-

voted cult following, with many families returning every holiday. He is a wonder to kids and parents alike, with a mysterious knack for intuiting a child's deepest desires and recalling details about their lives.

His ability to instantly summon the names of visitors he hasn't seen in a year or more attracts late believers in droves. Their legs droop nearly to the ground when they sit on his lap. Their scribbled wish lists go far beyond dolls and fire-trucks to iPods and digital cameras.

Even the doubters find him difficult to explain. Or to resist.

Before Kate Nette, a 10-year-old from South Riding, sat on Santa's lap, she was full of skepticism. She had dismissed him as "a guy in a suit who gets paid to be there." Then he asked how her field trip had been that day. As it happened, she had been on a field trip that day.

"Totally random," she told her cousin Daniel Nette, 12, afterward. Her doubt was wavering.

SANTA CONTINUED ON A4

Fewer moving to South and West

FLORIDA, NEVADA TAKE BIGGEST HITS

Housing crash, economy blamed in reversals

BY CAROL MORELLO

After decades of rapid growth in which housing developments sprouted in swamps, farmland and deserts, the number of Americans moving to several states in the South and the West has slowed sharply because of the recession and housing bust, according to Census Bureau figures released Wednesday.

The longtime magnets of Florida and Nevada, which had benefited most as people fled the dreary cold of the Northeast and Midwest, saw more Americans move out than move in during the year that ended July 1. California also had a net loss of so-called domestic migrants, although in all three states the impact was blunted by immigration from other countries and by natural growth because of births.

The state population figures foreshadow a political realignment that will occur after the 2010 Census, which is used to determine the reapportionment of seats in the House of Representatives. Texas, which had the biggest population growth last year, 478,000 people, is among the states that stand to gain seats, and states in the Northeast and Midwest could lose.

The economic downturn and the upheaval it has spawned are creating an unusual set of challenges for next April's national count. Foreclosures and job losses have caused many to give up their homes and move in with friends and family, and Census Bureau officials fear that those people could be undercounted. As the latest data suggest, hard times have led many people to abandon once-booming locales, and increasing numbers of others to stay put, when they cannot sell their houses or land new jobs.

The economy has also reshuffled the growth rates of states, transplanting

GROWTH CONTINUED ON A5

In Thuluyah, reverberations of a U.S. raid

2003 foray set off a series of unfortunate events that still haunt Iraqi town

BY ANTHONY SHADID

THULUYAH, IRAQ — Recitation of the Koran, mournful but consoling, played from a scratchy cassette as the men gathered in the funeral tent for condolences. They sipped bitter Arabic coffee, only enough to leave an aftertaste. As they smoked cigarettes, an American helicopter rumbled overhead, its rotors sounding the familiar drumbeat of war.

The men had arrived on this day in June 2003 to pay their respects to Hashim Mohammed Aani, a chubby 15-year-old who was one of three people killed a day before in a U.S. raid through this lush region on the sweep of the Tigris River.

An omen, a soft-spoken former judge called the shy boy's death. Other mourners called it a tragedy. To the rest of Iraq, it was little more than a statistic, incidental in the killing fields the country



NADA BAKRI/THE WASHINGTON POST

Residents arrive for prayers at the Caliphs Mosque in Thuluyah, north of Baghdad.

would soon be reduced to. The raid itself was a footnote.

This is the story of that footnote, a cautionary tale in the Iraq war. It is the story of the raid's unintended consequences — a chain of events that began as soon as American troops set foot in Thuluyah. As

the U.S. military departs Iraq, those events have brought the town full circle, returning it to where it was when Saddam Hussein fell.

Drawing on dozens of interviews and

THULUYAH CONTINUED ON A8

Year of the electric car dawns, with some new inconveniences

BY PETER WHORISKEY

It was dark and rainy, and the battery on his nifty Mini E electric car was almost gone.

Paul Heitmann rolled quietly through the suburban New Jersey gloom, peering through the rain on the windshield, not sure what he was looking for, anxiety turning into panic. He needed juice. He spotted a Lukoil gas station, which was closed, and beside the point, anyway. But beyond the pumps, there was a Coke machine, and it was lit up.

"I thought 'Finally!' because I knew if there was light, there would be electricity," he said. "I managed to find the outlet behind the Coke machine and plugged in."

As many of the auto companies tell it, next year may be the year that the massive U.S. auto industry really begins to go electric.

The all-battery Leaf from Nissan is scheduled to go on sale in November. General Motors will begin selling the Chevy Volt, a primarily electric car (with

a small auxiliary gasoline engine that kicks in to boost the car's range). Ford has plans to produce an electric commercial van. The Obama administration has doled out \$2.4 billion to companies involved in producing batteries and other parts of electric cars.

"We have to get on with the electrification of our industry," William Clay Ford Jr., chairman of Ford, said during a visit to Washington on Monday.

"I know we have to have an electric car," GM Chairman Edward E. Whitacre Jr. told reporters last week.

But overshadowing prospects for the transition of the vast U.S. auto fleet to electric — and the billions of dollars the automakers have invested in the switch — is the question of whether anyone beyond a sliver of enthusiasts will soon embrace the newfangled cars, which force drivers to rethink their habits and expectations of convenience.

For now, the only major automaker with a fleet of new all-electric vehicles priced for mainstream consumers is

CARS CONTINUED ON A11

INSIDE

WASHINGTON
New approach to nation-building
Defense Secretary Robert Gates puts the off-feuding Pentagon and State Department jointly in charge of three funds aimed at stabilizing faltering countries. **A2**

STYLE
Running the world, and looking good doing it
It was probably inevitable, given the disappearing line between celebrity and politics: A new Web site ranks the hottest heads of state. Yulia Tymoshenko, the golden-braided prime minister of Ukraine, came in at No. 1. Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, bottom right, was No. 2, while Obama placed a distant 15. **C2**



METRO
A bit of holiday magic
A snowbound woman in the District gets a little something extra for Christmas from the Department of Public Works. **B1**

'Recipe for Ice' on Christmas
If you're planning a visit to Grandmother's house for the holiday, you might think about going the night before. Rain could fall on Christmas morning, making things slippery and wet around Washington. **B2, B3**



SPORTS
CAPITALS
5
SABRES
2
Nicklas Backstrom scores two goals as the Capitals cruise past Buffalo. **D1**

For some children (and grown-ups), belief in Santa never grows old

SANTA FROM A1

"Freaky," Daniel agreed. "Maybe he has elves that are spies." He eyed his mother, Janice. "Maybe you're one," he said.

Children traditionally lose faith in Santa at age 8, polls say. But Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist and author of a book called "The Power of Your Child's Imagination," said she often meets late believers in her practice.

"Just as there are children that grow up too fast, there are children who remain innocent for a while longer," Reznick said. "It's sweet." And the parents often get in on the act, she said, "because adults like to believe childhood is a lovely, carefree time. And it's not true."

This year, Galen has watched her parents go through a rocky patch, struggle with money and decide to put her childhood home in Falls Church up for sale.

Given everything she's going

through, said her mother, Diane, "why not let her have the magic?"

Santa's spell hasn't been broken for Fiona Penn, either. A 12-year-old student at Carl Sandburg Middle School in the Alexandria part of Fairfax, Fiona is aware of the ubiquitous shopping mall Santas and the fact that some presents arrive via a UPS truck, not from the sky. But she chooses to believe that *her* Santa is different.

"The mall Santas, they change. They get hired and fired. But he's the real one," she said.

Witnesses say that the Merrifield Santa appears not to have aged in 20 years (!) but is thoroughly modern. He tells children that his sleigh has a GPS system. He has a book out. Actually two: "St. Nicholas of the 21st Century" and "Santa's Notebook" — each \$8 on your way out.

He exerts full creative control over the decor of the Santa house, filling it with snowmen and trees, an antique sleigh and twinkling blue lights on the ceiling, like tiny

stars.

But he is reluctant to reveal much more and worries about his media image, and whether he should be named.

"Can't you just say the man who is responsible for all of this, the man behind it all, is John Buckreis?" fretted the 79-year-old retired horticulturalist.

His chief elf passes a note: "You work for a newspaper called *The Washington Post*. Your paper honors anonymous sources. Honor Santa Claus. Don't be a grinch."

The parents who take their children to the garden center know the drill. Toting sack dinners and their kids' homework assignments, they start lining up more than an hour before Santa appears in a jangle of bells.

They sign the guest book, where Santa, in crooked penmanship, asks them to list "How many years visiting the Real Santa." The Fitzpatricks of Leesburg have been coming 35 years. The Sullivans of Herndon, 34.

Throughout the evening, Santa speaks earnestly to his young visitors from his sleigh, urging them to clean their rooms and quit fighting with their siblings. He sends each kid out with a religious bookmark to remind them of the true spirit of the season.

The line to see him was so long one recent night that some moms and dads gave up after a while, pulling their children to the door as they moaned like foghorns.

After waiting for nearly four hours, Galen finally made it to the front of the line. Santa seemed glad to see her. She showed him pictures of Eli, and then one of the dog before that. She presented her list. He waved off the purple Chuck Taylor high tops but seemed okay with the nail



TRACY A. WOODWARD/THE WASHINGTON POST

Madison Burns of Fort Belvoir listens to the crowd at the Merrifield Garden Center sing "Happy Birthday" as she visits Santa on her 11th birthday. Children and their parents wait hours to see him.

polish set or a "New Moon" vampire T-shirt. And maybe a chew bone for Eli.

Then he zinged her with a speech he said he saves for all the late believers:

"You've been coming to see me a long time. I remember the first time you came to see me. Next year, you probably won't come and see me anymore, and that's okay. That's how life is. . . . But I want you to know that your best Christmases are before you, with

your family and friends you haven't met yet."

Galen eyed him solemnly as he spoke but didn't respond.

Not everyone ages out of their connection with Santa. Two years ago, Amanda Brady, 24, who'd visited Santa for years as a child, returned to the garden center with her preschooler. The Woodbridge teacher thought her old friend might have forgotten her, but he hadn't.

"He remembered exactly who I

was. He said, 'It's really good to see you, Amanda, how have you been?' " she recalled. "It shocked me. . . . I stopped believing at age 12, but when I saw him again, I didn't know whether to believe in him or not. Something about it was really cool. If he knows who I am, he's gotta have some kind of magic going for him."

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Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

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