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## Hill GOP eyes Social Security reform

By James G. Lakely

Republicans leaders in Congress are taking the lead in crafting Social Security reform, saying President Bush was making little progress on the landmark reform proposal.

When congressional leaders met with Mr. Bush last week, they were surprised that the president didn't know how much trouble his plan was in, said a source close to the meeting who requested anonymity.

"The more he talked about it, the worse it got," said the source, who worked in previous Republican administrations. "This White House does not encourage negative feedback. You know that Bush's legislative affairs office is dysfunctional because they weren't bringing any of the warning signs back to the White House."

White House spokesman Trent Duffy disputed that version of events.

"I can't imagine the president was surprised by reports that reforming Social Security is difficult; it's a challenge," Mr. Duffy said. "He's held 30-some meetings with Republican congressmen for this very reason, so he can know what's going on."

But the effort to reform Social Security had stalled in recent

weeks, with polls showing a steady slip in public support for the president's private-accounts plan and some legislative allies declining to endorse his ideas wholeheartedly.

**John C. Goodman**, president of the **National Center for Policy Analysis** who has testified as an expert at White House Social Security rallies, said there was "a lot of behind-the-scenes arguing about what the message should be" in the White House and on Capitol Hill.

"Six months into the deal and Republicans still can't agree on what is the right message," Mr. Goodman said. "I've been to events where we've had three different messages."

None of the lawmakers who have taken the lead in crafting a bill that would give Mr. Bush at least part of the reforms he wants suggested that the White House has bungled Social Security. However, it is clear that the White House has taken a secondary role after months of dictating its demands to Congress on the issue.

"This whole idea originated here," Rep. E. Clay Shaw Jr., Florida Republican, said. "So far, there is no bill that you can call the president's bill that has been

filed. You can draw your own conclusions from that."

Rep. Jim McCrery, Louisiana Republican and chairman of the Ways and Means Social Security subcommittee who is pushing a bill that would fund private retirement accounts with the system's diminishing surplus, made it clear that the White House has morphed from consultant to client.

"We don't have regular meetings, but when there is a need," Mr. McCrery said, noting that most of his meetings with Al Hubbard, Mr. Bush's chief economic adviser and point man on Social Security "have been adequate to maintain communication."

Rep. Paul D. Ryan, Wisconsin Republican and prominent Social Security reformer, said there was never enough agreement -- even among Republicans -- to implement everything Mr. Bush wanted at once.

"People felt we needed to get consensus, and we just didn't have consensus on a big approach because of how partisan it's been," Mr. Ryan said. "I think [the White House] sees us building some momentum. This is a down payment on reform."