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HULME



Economy ripe for Bush stimulus plan

By Donald Lambro

WASHINGTON — There is now no doubt that President Bush will ask the new Republican-run Congress to pass a tax-cutting stimulus bill to reinvigorate the nation's lackluster economy.

The president, who admitted in his campaign stump speeches that the economy was "just bumping along," is being urged by his top advisers to speed up the tax cuts enacted last year.

"Accelerating the tax cuts is very high on our list," a key administration official told me.

Bruce Josten, chief lobbyist for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce who has participated in White House economic strategy meetings, now says that, "there will be a stimulus package of some kind. I have no doubt about that."

Bush has made no final decisions about what he wants in the plan, but the proposals before him last week were bold and far-reaching, according to White House officials. Among them: Moving up the income tax cuts that are now scheduled to take effect in January 2004 and 2006, making the tax cuts permanent, including repealing the estate tax; and cutting the tax on dividends and capital gains to boost stock values and encouraging investment and venture capital.

The plan will most likely include proposals to expand contribution limits for Individual Retirement Accounts and 401(k)s and additional tax cuts for businesses to invest, expand and create jobs.

The White House is also considering a wide range of other ambitious policy initiatives. Emboldened by the mandate he won in the congressional elections, Bush seems ready to spend some of that political capital on some big reforms.

"Maybe we can now go after things that we thought were tougher nuts to crack and that we have been putting off," a White House adviser told



morton kondracke

• commentary

me. "With the mandate from this election, the president can go after two or three more things in the new Congress.

"The game has changed so much (since the elections). Everybody had to take a step back and realize what is possible now. It's a matter of reprioritizing what you can do in this new political environment that you could not do in the previous environment," this official said.

But what else will Bush do with this mandate? And how much of that capital is he willing to spend?

A number of major, marked reforms are sitting on his desk awaiting a presidential decision. There is his unprecedented Social Security plan to let workers invest a part of their payroll taxes in stocks and bonds. Despite the pounding it took from Democrats this year, public support for the idea rose and Bush advisers such as Karl Rove want him to press Congress to take it up next year.

Another proposal Bush might push: a generous tax credit to help pay for health-care costs among the insured to counter a Kennedy-Gore plan to enact a federally financed, big-spending, single-payer plan.

But besides a likely war with Iraq and preventing another terrorist attack, energizing an anemic economy remains at the top of his agenda. The advice the president is getting from chief economic adviser Larry Lindsey is that this economy needs all the tax-cut help he can give it.

In a recent interview, Lindsey declined comment on the stimulus package, but did paint a mixed, somewhat pessimistic picture of the U.S. economy.

"On the good news side, productivity seems to be very strong and that suggests growth long-term is likely to be at a faster rate," he said. "On the other side we face the uncertainties of war and terrorism and that has economic and psychological effects that are very difficult to evaluate or predict."

The bottom line in the economy's future, he added, is that "uncertainty is high."

When Lindsey crafted Bush's income tax rate cut plan in 2000, he said it was "an insurance policy" against a downturn in the economy. He had predicted for years that the 1990s' bubble would burst. When it did, and the United States slid into a recession, the Bush tax cuts were there to make that downturn one of the shortest in memory.

Now, with the economy slowing down in this fourth quarter and with business economists forecasting a further slowdown in the first three months of the new year, Lindsey is recommending that the tax cuts be stepped up as an insurance policy.

Asked if Bush is likely to move in that direction, Lindsey says, "We may."

It can't come too soon for this White House. No matter how successful the war against terrorism might be, or how quickly a war with Iraq is won, a weak economy could still make Bush a one-term president, as it did for his father.

The two-year campaign cycle for the 2004 election begins in earnest next month and the fate of Bush's presidency could be decided by the kind of stimulus package he sends to Capitol Hill in January.

Editors note: Morton Kondracke is on vacation this week

I want a natural Christmas tree

I want a free range Christmas tree.

It makes me sad, seeing trees moving by the truckload, all wrapped up in plastic mesh, their branches bound to the trunks, stacked up like so much cordwood — which they'll never have a chance to become.

You'd think at least with modern technology, they'd have a way to get the trees to you fresh, but no, unbind the limbs, set one up, and the needles will start falling right off.

I doubt it's safe to have one of these things in your house for more than, oh, say, 12 hours. After that, I think the fire code requires a sprinkler system.

Even when we lived in Kansas City, we cut our own trees, driving out to a tree farm in the countryside. It wasn't exactly the north woods — you drove right up to the lot, and the trees had been shaped and sprayed dark green — but at least you knew the tree was fresh.

When we moved to Colorado, picking a Christmas tree took on a whole new meaning. The first winter, we went out with friends. She was the artistic type, and very picky. There was always a better tree just over the next ridge. There are a lot of ridges in Colorado. Her husband was carrying the ax, and I was starting to worry about him.

That was 20 years ago, though, and they're still married. So are we, but we had some memorable arguments while trying to pick a tree.

I like to get a nice one. Cynthia is not nearly as picky, especially when she is up to her belt in snow. She doesn't like snow and she hates being cold.



steve haynes

• along the sappa

In fact, I'm not sure why she ever agreed to go out tree hunting. I guess it was the thing to do when you live in the mountains.

You had to go buy a permit from the Forest Service. That allowed you to cut one tree up to 8 feet tall. When you cut your tree, you had to tag it. Otherwise, the timber cops could give you a ticket. They didn't have much else to do in the dead of winter.

In a dry winter, Cynthia and the kids could be pretty enthusiastic about going out on the hunt. In a snow year, well, there was a lot of pressure to take the first one we saw.

Sometimes, those had to have one side up against the wall. Or be tied to a nail in the ceiling. Or have a branch transplanted.

But when we threw it on top of the Bronco and took it home, we knew it was fresh. It was ours. It was Christmas.

And Lordy, nothing smells better than a fresh spruce in the living room.

Did I mention that trees always look smaller outdoors?

The little guys in amongst the 100-footers just

look tiny and cute. Until you try to squeeze them into the living room.

We almost always wound up sawing a foot or two off the base to make them fit.

If you were really ambitious, you could buy two permits and take a 16-foot tree.

Because the office spruce were 70-80 foot, we used to cut a 16-footer for a Christmas tree in the front yard. It became sort of a town tradition.

Hauling those back to the road was a trip. Usually, I'd hook up a log chain, put the Bronco in four-wheel-low and drag it up to the road.

It's kind of a guy thing, playing logger out in the woods.

Those were the days.

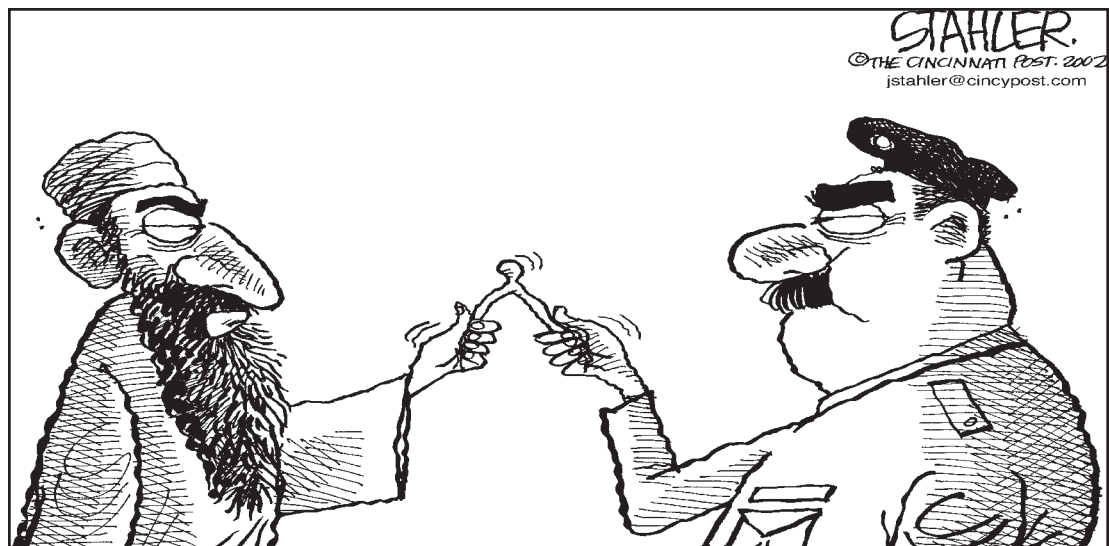
It's miles to the nearest tree farm, and we put up Mom's old artificial tree most years. I miss the smell, but I can't stand the thought of those poor trees traveling cross-country all trussed up like that.

berry's world



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"IT'LL BE FUN TO PLAY 'PIN THE TAIL ON THE DONKEY' HERE IN YOUR PALACE, BUT YOU HAVE TO PROMISE NOT TO HIDE ANYTHING WHILE WE DO."



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