

## What Happened

### **Question 1: After years of debating the issue, Congress approved legislation that would add prescription drug coverage to Medicare. Why did the legislation succeed this year?**

Answer: There were several factors. President Bush made it one of his top domestic policy priorities, which put pressure on Congress to take action. Many members in both parties had campaigned on the issue and were eager to deliver, even if the bill wasn't exactly how they would provide drug coverage to seniors. And with growing budget deficits, lawmakers knew the \$400 billion that Congress decided to spend this year on a drug benefit might not be around again for a long time. All of those forces helped push Congress to pass a drug bill this year, although many Democrats and some GOP conservatives do not like the measure.

### **Question 2: What do they dislike about it?**

Answer: Democrats say it will undermine Medicare. They don't like the idea of private insurance companies providing drug coverage to Medicare beneficiaries and would prefer that the government provide the benefits. Democrats fear that private companies will skim off the healthiest beneficiaries and leave the sicker elderly in the traditional fee-for-service program. They also argue that having the government negotiate prices with drug companies will be more effective than leaving it to private insurers. Republican conservatives fear that the drug benefit will cost far more than the \$400 billion projected over the next decade, and that taxpayers will be stuck paying for a costly benefit.

### **Question 3: When will the benefit begin?**

Answer: Medicare drug coverage does not begin until Jan. 1, 2006, but in about six months beneficiaries will be able to purchase a Medicare-approved prescription drug card which administration officials have said will help beneficiaries save as much as 25 percent on their drug costs. But critics say that such cards are already available and will do little to cut prescription drug costs for the elderly.

### **Question 4: Congress also passed a ban on a procedure that opponents refer to as "partial-birth" abortion. Can you tell us about that?**

Answer: Although the measure was a top GOP priority in both chambers this year, it took 10 months to finish the bill. The final measure stripped Senate-approved language that reaffirmed the landmark 1973 Supreme Court ruling *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion.

### **Question 5: Are abortion rights proponents challenging this action in the courts?**

Answer: They are -- in three separate federal courts -- on the grounds that the law is unconstitutional because it does not include an exemption for cases where the procedure is needed to protect a woman's health. The Department of Justice is defending the law against the court challenges.

### **Question 6: In his State of the Union Address, President Bush called for a \$15 billion, five-year funding program to fight the international spread of HIV/AIDS as well as TB and malaria. While Congress approved the legislation, there is still a dispute over how much money is allocated each year. Can you give us the details?**

Answer: While the bill authorizes up to \$3 billion a year for five years, President Bush asked for only \$2 billion in his budget, arguing that the programs need time to ramp up. Appropriators made room for \$1.65 billion in the fiscal 2004 foreign operations spending bill, with another \$754 million in the Labor-HHS-Education spending bill. Both of those measures were folded into the omnibus spending bill, which stalled in the Senate in December but is expected to clear in January when Congress returns. Democrats plan to continue pushing for the full \$3 billion a year in funding.