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CHAMBLISS TALKS ABOUT PEACHCARE, WATER AND WAR

Sen. Saxby Chambliss called the other date to update me — and you — on a number of issues currently ricocheting around Washington, including continued federal funding for the State Children's Insurance Program, known in Georgia as PeachCare. The program authorizes states to provide healthcare coverage to "targeted low-income children" who are not eligible for Medicaid and who are uninsured. Chambliss calls Georgia's PeachCare the "model" program among state efforts.

Under PeachCare children receive health benefits including dental care and vision care with a maximum premium of \$70 for two or more children over six years of age. With some 284,000 children enrolled, Georgia ranks fifth nationally in size. Only California, New York, Florida and Texas — all larger states — have enrolled more children. To qualify, a family of four must have a maximum income of \$48,527, or 225 percent above the poverty level. The federal government provides roughly 73 percent of the dollars, the state puts in the rest.

Now comes the tug-of-war between the White House and Congress, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives and special interest groups of all stripes using needy children as pawns. The White House recently vetoed a Democratic bill that would have expanded the program by \$35 billion. Congress has so far failed to override the veto.

Liberal media and the Democratic leadership accuse Republicans of being "against children." "That's absurd," Chambliss says, "I've never voted not to cover children. What I am opposed to is the effort to expand the program to adults and raise the eligibility to over 400 percent of the poverty level," or an annual income of roughly \$80,000.

With state officials hammering him on one side for money for PeachCare and liberal lawmakers on the other side blatantly trying to make political hay of the issue, does the senator feel caught in the middle? "I can't worry about that," he says. "I just want to be sure the program is not discontinued, and I don't think it will be." Chambliss says a continuing resolution can maintain the program for at least another 18 months until the differences can be worked out. "And they will be," he predicts.

Chambliss is not quite as optimistic about the state's water crisis. After our conversation, he was headed to the White House to hand deliver a note from the Georgia congressional delegation expressing its unanimous view that the Corps of Engineers must stop releasing billions of gallons of water from Georgia's lakes for the mussels in Florida. He had high praise for Gov. Sonny Perdue's efforts to curb water usage in the state and to pressure the Corps of Engineers to release less water but also recognized the strong opposition from the governors of Alabama and Florida to Perdue's efforts. "Somehow we are going to have to get the governors together here in Washington to work things out, including how much water is available and how much everyone needs," he says. That effort is now underway.

Chambliss says a good short-term solution would be to get the corps to rewrite its outdated water control manuals, which provide guidelines and usage allocations. He feels rewritten guidelines could mean more water for Georgia without harming the ecosystem downstream. The long-term solution, he says, is the construction of more reservoirs. But that's years away and will cost billions of dollars.

I asked him about the war in Iraq. Chambliss says the rhetoric in Washington is more subdued these days because "we are winning. The tide has shifted in Iraq. Things are improving and the Democrats know it." As a result, he predicts that you should see "significant" troop withdrawals by the end of 2008, as Iraqis take more control over the governance of their country.

There were a number of other issues I wanted to ask him about, but the White House was waiting. In our brief conversation, Saxby Chambliss sounded like a man who thoroughly enjoys his job as Georgia's senior senator. He didn't say so, but I suspect he wouldn't mind another six years at it if you give him the opportunity next year. After listening to what he has to put up with in Washington, he can have it.