

VOLUME 20
NUMBER 8



THE LEADER

25¢

LARGEST PAID NON-DAILY
NEWSPAPER IN ARKANSAS

WWW.ARKANSASLEADER.COM

FOUNDED IN 1987

• WEEKEND EDITION • COVERING LONOKE, WHITE AND NORTH PULASKI COUNTIES

SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 2006

SENATORSPEAKS

Pryor wants new planes for air base

INSIGHT If Democrats focus on a positive message and don't just bank on the national groundswell of disapproval of the president, his cabinet and Congress, the party could control one or both houses of Congress in November.

By JOHN HOFHEIMER
Leader staff writer

Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark. said Thursday that the Department of Defense needs a smaller version of the C-130J even better suited to the kind of military actions being fought in the Middle East and that pilots and crews for those planes should be trained at Little Rock Air Force Base, like all other C-130 crews.

In a sitdown visit with Leader publisher Garrick Feldman, Pryor discussed topics ranging from Republican attacks on the judiciary, to the occupation of Iraq, the FEMA trailer boondoggle at Hope and even payday lenders before he made his offhand C-130 remark as he waited to climb into the van that serves as his mobile office.

Pryor said the smaller C-130 was the Army's idea, but that

there currently was no design or production in sight.

"It would be a twin-engine plane," said the senator, "about two-thirds the size of the full-sized plane and capable of hauling about one-third the cargo."

"For a lot of missions it would make sense," he said. "I'd like to make sure it comes to Little Rock Air Force Base."

The new planes would be welcome at the base and in the community.

The Base Realignment and Closure Commission's final recommendation calls for an increase of only six C-130s at the base, and an early estimate of 4,000 new jobs has been

reduced to 284 to 600 new jobs.

REGULATE LENDERS

Pryor, who was state attorney general when the General Assembly passed a law effectively exempting payday lenders from the state's usury laws, said he had been unfairly pilloried in the statewide daily as author of that bill.

Within a month of taking office, he said, payday lenders approached him to support legislation even more favorable.

"I said I would oppose the bill unless it would be regulat-



Sen. Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) discusses a wide range of issues during an interview at The Leader on Thursday morning.

Please see PRYOR, Page 7A

JOHN HOFHEIMER/Leader photo

▶ Pryor

Continued from Page 1A

ed," he said. Regulation was made the job of the Board of Collection Agencies, and Pryor said he remained neutral.

The law that did pass had three important provisions, he said. First, it created a regulatory scheme and allowed consumers to go to the attorney general. Second, it restricted lenders from rolling over loans, thus keeping borrowers perpetually on the hook. Third, it required transparency to the customers, so they knew what their interest rate would be.

He said interest rates should not exceed the 17 percent allowed by the state Constitution, but he wondered where people in need would get the loans they needed to tide them over.

"We had a half-dozen cases against (payday lenders)," he said. "Where prac-

tices were egregious, we ran some out of the state."

"It's partly a legal problem, partly a social problem," Pryor said.

He said the banks, savings and loans and credit unions, who complained the loudest, also said they weren't prepared to make small loans to high-risk borrowers.

IRAQ

Pryor said Iraq continued to be the largest and most immediate problem for Congress and the president.

"The good news is that the soldiers are rebuilding infrastructure and schools and the country is getting some elements of democracy," he said.

But on the negative side, "The Iraqi security forces haven't shown they can handle things on their own," he said. "Some say a civil war already has started. If we pull out now, there will be chaos pretty quick," he added.

He said Iraqi leaders needed to under-

stand that the U.S. commitment of troops is not open-ended.

"The problem with Bush's Iraq rationale—it didn't prove very sound regarding weapons of mass destruction. The connection with Al Qaida is disproven, but the bottom line, we're there, we have to win...to help establish democracy."

"I really wish we'd been more patient upfront," he said, "then we'd have ended up with a broad-based coalition."

"More than 2,000 U.S. soldiers have died," said Pryor. "The chickens are coming home to roost."

As it is, the Iraqi constitution is flawed, he said. The Shiites are the winners, the Sunnis and the Kurds the losers.

Of former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's contention that hostile criticism of that and other courts by former Senate Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Tex., and other right-wing Republicans has moved the country

toward a dictatorship, Pryor said the judiciary needs to protect the Constitution.

He alluded to experts who have said that the executive branch is always the greatest threat to the Constitution and liberties granted within, followed by the Congress with the judicial branch the least threatening of the three.

MAJOR SHIFT

"This is probably going to be a good year at the ballot box for Democrats," Pryor said of the 2006 midterm elections.

He said Democrats should pick up seats and even control of one or both houses of Congress, as well as several governorships, the one in Arkansas among them.

But, he warned, anger or dissatisfaction with President George W. Bush and the war is not enough.

"The Democratic challenge...people need reasons to vote for us," he said.

"We're starting to see that crystallize with the Democrats," he said.

Pryor was critical of Bush's FEMA director, Michael Chertoff, who, he said, ordered \$800 million worth of the wrong kind of trailers and now can't move them to relieve hurricane victims unless FEMA waives its own rules about putting mobile homes in a flood plain.

Pryor said FEMA should have ordered travel trailers that could be set up in a front yard and easily plugged into the electrical grid.

Pryor said Chertoff's FEMA was not prepared in the way President Bill Clinton's FEMA director, James Lee Witt, was when responding to emergencies.

Pryor said he and Cong. Mike Ross had filed a bill ordering FEMA to waive its flood-plain restriction and get the trailers—11,000 of them are stored at Hope—where displaced victims could use them.