

ROLL CALL

He's Welcome

By Kate Ackley and Tory Newmyer

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The pro-privatization student group Students for Saving Social Security ended their summer crash course on lobbying with a bang Tuesday.

About 150 students participating in the group crammed Room 450 in the Old Executive Office Building to hear a thank-you for their efforts from President Bush.

The president, who was introduced by White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove and Treasury Secretary John Snow, rallied the crowd for about 40 minutes.

Without discussing legislative specifics — or a sense of when he expects Congress to produce a bill — Bush pumped up his rapt audience on the benefits of personal accounts and the White House's commitment to seeing their plan through.

"He was very upbeat and positive, sending a clear message to the kids their efforts are not going unnoticed," said Jade West, a top lobbyist for the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors who helped organize the event.

Also represented at the event were members of COMPASS, the business coalition backing the president's reform plan. Wade helps lead membership recruitment for the group.

Early efforts to take up Social Security reform in Congress foundered this year when the issue failed to gain traction publicly. Congressional Republicans, however, plan to continue working on the matter when they return from their August recess. And the White House, which has made reform a top domestic priority, is keeping up pressure on Congress to address problems with the federal retirement program.

Bush met with COMPASS to explain "why it was important to move forward on Social Security," White House spokesman Trent Duffy said.

"The president remains committed to it and he is not going to give up," he said.

West said Bush told the crowd he "hoped everybody in Washington could rise above politics, get together, not worry about who's getting credit, and come to the table."